

BUNGO

STRAY DOGS

KAFKA ASAGIRI Illustration by SANGO HARUKAWA

3

THE
UNTOLD
ORIGINS
OF THE
DETECTIVE
AGENCY





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BUNGO
STRAY DOGS
THE UNTOLD ORIGINS
OF THE DETECTIVE AGENCY



-HANDLE A CASE
-SOLVE AN IN-HOUSE ISSUE
-HIDEYOSHI TOYOTOMI
-EIGHT FINGERS

The debate over the entrance exam had reached a fever pitch. (Omitted) Everyone put their heads together and passionately debated the topic in an effort to select the best rookie for the agency...or at least, that was what they should have done. In reality, this bunch was simply far too eccentric to put out a proposal that could be considered even halfway decent.

(A Day at the Detective Agency)

"Let the first entrance exam trial meeting begin!"



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STRAY DOGS

THE UNTOLD ORIGINS
OF THE DETECTIVE AGENCY



KAFKA ASAGIRI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SANGO HARUKAWA



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Bungo Stray Dogs, Volume 3
KAFKA ASAGIRI

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BUNGO STRAY DOGS Vol. 3 TANTEISHA SETSURITSU HIWA

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First published in JAPAN in 2015 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On
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First Yen On Edition: February 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Asagiri, Kafka, author. | Harukawa, Sango, illustrator. | Rutsohn, Matt, translator.

Title: Osamu Dazai's entrance exam / Kafka Asagiri ; illustration by Sango Harukawa ; translation by Matt Rutsohn.

Other titles: Dazai Osamu no nyåusha shiken. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2019. |

Series: Bungo stray dogs ; Volume 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2019005328 | ISBN 9781975303228 (v. 1 : pbk.) |

ISBN 9781975303242 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975303266 (v. 3 : pbk.)

Classification: LCC PL867.5.S234 D3913 2019 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019005328>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-0326-6 (paperback)

978-1-9753-0327-3 (ebook)

E3-20200129-JV-NF-ORI

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A DAY AT THE DETECTIVE AGENCY

“Kunikida, how did the Armed Detective Agency get started anyway?”

Sitting at a café, Junichiro Tanizaki curiously tilted his head. The tall man sitting on the other side of the table furrowed his already wrinkled brows, then replied with the utmost seriousness, “You don’t even know that?”

“No, I don’t... Sorry.”

It was night. Two men sat facing each other at a narrow-seated table at the back of a café. Resting on the table between them were sesame *dango* and *houjicha*—roasted green tea—for two. Both men were stern-faced. A stranger would instinctively do a double take at the curious scene, but these two were agents at the Armed Detective Agency in the middle of a late-night meeting. This vaguely old-fashioned teahouse was Café Uzumaki, located on the first floor of the same building the Armed Detective Agency worked out of.

“I work here, and I still don’t even know how it got started. Do you, Kunikida?”

“Of course I do.” Doppo Kunikida nodded, seated across from Tanizaki.

“I knew you would,” Tanizaki said with a smile.

“Only a faint idea, though.”

“A faint idea?”

“Yeah, I heard it all secondhand, though. The agency was established roughly a decade ago, by the president. Word is, something happened around then, and then the agency was born.”

Tanizaki nodded. “I see. You, uh... You really do only have a faint idea, huh?”

“Well, I wasn’t lying, was I? I don’t know any more details than that. I never got another chance to ask about it. Why don’t you ask the president yourself?”

Tanizaki grew slightly flustered. “M-me? No way. I’m still a nobody at the agency.”

“Rank is irrelevant. The president isn’t the kind of person who would keep secrets like this.”

“But, like, I’d be way too nervous... Have you seen the president’s eyes when he’s angry? He could burn a hole through an iron plate. He’d probably even make a little girl cry.”

“That’s right.” Kunikida nodded in agreement. “The president is a master of martial arts of all styles. Ever since he founded the detective agency, he’s managed to uproot all sorts of evils and uncover numerous conspiracies. He’s head and shoulders above the rest. A single glare from that man could bring blood spewing out of the eyes of several little girls, instantly killing them. *Instantly*,” Kunikida repeated once more for emphasis.

“That sounds like a curse,” said Tanizaki.

“And that’s why he’s the president. So why did you want to know how the agency was founded? No, I mean—I completely understand why you would be curious about your employer, but why now?”

“Well, about that...,” Tanizaki began as he took a sip of tea, but it was apparently still too hot. “Yow!” he exclaimed, sticking out his tongue, then continued. “Because Dazai asked me.”

“*Dazai*?” Kunikida’s expression immediately tensed.

“Yeah, so I—”

“Hold on. Wait. Give me a moment to calm down a little.” Kunikida raised his hand to signal to Tanizaki to pause. “Lately, I’ve been getting horrible stress-induced stomach pains whenever I hear his name. Just sensing he’s nearby brings flashes of black and white over my field of vision. It’s a natural warning signal, so just give me a few seconds to relax.”

“Th-that sounds awful... I know how you feel, though...” Tanizaki’s expression was pure pity.

“I’m the only one in the agency who can keep that worthless vagabond Dazai in check. Well, nobody can truly control him, but... the president has asked me to manage and supervise him. In other words, the president trusts me, so I cannot abandon my role to—”

Kunikida suddenly stopped midsentence. He gazed up at the ceiling, then rubbed his eyes. “Hmm...?” he asked. “Suddenly, the lighting seems off, like it’s flickering...”

Tanizaki curiously looked up at the lights, but there was nothing abnormal in the slightest.

“That’s my cue! ♪”

“Ahhh!” Kunikida’s chair rattled noisily.

A tall young man with messy black hair stood near the entrance. Draped in a khaki coat, he leaned his lanky figure against the café entrance while dangling a paper bag in his right hand.

It was Osamu Dazai—a member of the Armed Detective Agency just like the other two. “Ah, I never get tired of hearing Kunikida’s lovely screaming. I could practically see his life span shortening with my own two eyes. Oh, I’ll have my usual black tea, ma’am.”

The middle-aged café owner poked her head out from the back. “Oh, Dazai! Handsome as ever, I see!” she called out to him.

“Right back at you, ma’am!” Dazai returned the compliment with a wave, then took a seat right next to Kunikida. The already cramped table became even more so.

“Dazai... What are you doing here?” asked Kunikida in a growl, like a wounded beast threatening its natural enemy.

“Huh? I came so I could shave a few years off your life, of cour—”

Kunikida wrapped his hands around Dazai’s neck and violently shook him before he could even finish his sentence.

“How much do I have to suffer by your hand before it’s enough?! When...will...it...stop...?!”

“Wa-ha-ha-ha!” Dazai cackled, still being shaken.

“C-come on, let’s calm down, you two. We’re in public.”

Tanizaki’s eyes darted around the shop restlessly. However, this café was on the first floor of the same building the detective agency was in. Dazai’s eccentric behavior and Kunikida’s yelling were nothing new to the owner or even the other customers. Everyone warmly watched them from their seats as if they were observing a schoolyard tussle between two brothers.

As the patrons’ affectionate gazes fell on him as well, Tanizaki forced a half-hearted laugh. He had no other choice. Kunikida continued to shake Dazai, while Dazai continued to enjoy the punishment.

“You’re too laid-back! How dare you show your face again this late at night! Where were you at work today?! Out annoying someone just like you always do, no doubt! Who do you think cleans up after you and apologizes for your mess?!”

“Oh, that’s clearly y—”

“There is no way in *hell* I’m going to let you finish that sentence!”

Kunikida twisted Dazai’s neck, letting out a slight pop. Pure bliss was the only way to describe the look on Dazai’s face.

“Um, anyway...” Tanizaki spoke up. “I was telling Kunikida what we talked about earlier. You know, when you asked me why the Armed Detective Agency exists.”

“What?” Kunikida cast Dazai a dubious gaze.

“Yep.” Dazai’s twisted neck cracked and popped as he adjusted it. “I just met with Tanizaki around noon today.”

“Where?”

“At a bar.”

As the seconds crawled by, Kunikida’s expression gradually started to look like a patient with neurotoxins slowly poisoning his body.

“I figured you were out drinking somewhere when you skipped work today, so that’s fine. I’ll save my anger for later. However, Tanizaki, what were you doing there? Don’t tell me you were playing hooky as well? Surely an eighteen-year-old wouldn’t be skipping work

to day drink. Various studies and statistics have demonstrated the negative effects of underaged drinking, and there is clear proof that alcohol affects the secretion of testosterone. But regardless of the studies, if you start drinking now, your brain is going to turn into mush like his!" Kunikida firmly pointed to Dazai by his side.

"You may call me Mushy Brains." Dazai quickly lowered his head and bowed.

"N-no, you've got the wrong idea!" Tanizaki waved his hands in a fluster. "I was there for work. I was told to go to the bar, and when I went, I ran into Dazai, and—"

"Yep. Nice seeing you there!"

"What...? So you went there for work? To a bar where Dazai just happened to be? ...I find it hard to believe that this was a coincidence...which means Dazai asked you to meet him there. Did he ask you to pay his tab? Or did he cause a scene and need you to...?"

Kunikida stopped himself. His face turned pale before he bent forward at the waist.

"D-don't tell me... It was the opposite? Did more trouble find him again? Is that it?"

"I'm sorry, Kunikida." Tanizaki lowered his gaze apologetically.

"Sheesh, it wasn't a big deal. Certainly nothing worth glowering over like that." Dazai gleefully smirked. "All I did was drink and make merry with the folks at the bar, have a chat, listen to their stories, and go home. I promise... Oh, and there was a bomb somewhere in there."

"..."

Kunikida's upper body slowly rocked back and forth as he sat in silence.

"...Kunikida?" Worried, Tanizaki called out his colleague's name.

"I...passed out for a second there," Kunikida uttered feebly while lifting up his head. "A bomb...? Tanizaki, why didn't you say something at the start of our meeting? Who planted the bomb? Have the city police done anything about it? Did the military police's bomb squad take care of it? What happened to the bomb?"

"It's right here." Dazai dropped a paper bag on the table with a thud.

"Aggghhh!" Startled, Kunikida jumped back—chair and all.

"Don't worry. Despite its realistic appearance, it's a fake." Dazai shrugged. "I'll make this short. The bomb was delivered yesterday to my usual haunt, addressed to me from an anonymous sender. I opened the package and found this inside. Right when I unwrapped it, the fuse came off. Even the slightest movement might have caused it to explode, so the city police and the detective agency were duly contacted."

"And that's why I was sent over there," said Tanizaki.

“I swear, every single time... How do you manage to constantly get yourself involved in these messes?”

Kunikida’s face was twisted in anguish as if he had just eaten a poisonous mushroom.

“Aw, c’mon, it’s just a fake.” At that moment, the tea Dazai ordered was brought to the table. Grinning, Dazai dropped a few sugar cubes in his teacup before taking a sip. Then he said, “This bomb ended up being a timer without any explosive components inside. Nothing more than a replica. Someone was just messing with me. Anyway, I already spoke with the perpetrator, so everything’s okay now.”

“Were they arrested?”

“Yep. I found a scrap of paper when I opened the bomb that said, ‘Keep your eyes on me and me alone.’ Turns out it was one woman’s unique yet extreme way of telling me she was obsessed with me. I had a few ideas as to who it could be, so I contacted them one by one until I found the criminal. After a good scolding, I convinced her it just wasn’t going to work out between the two of us. Besides, I wouldn’t be able to enjoy myself at the pub if she kept sending me bombs every day.”

Kunikida, in that moment the picture of exhaustion itself, stared at Dazai.

“...I see.”

His response was brief, but the look on his face essentially said, “I can’t even begin to fathom why someone like him is so popular with women.”

“And then one of the cops who showed up said to me, ‘It’s thanks to the Armed Detective Agency’s efforts to keep the city safe that we can do our jobs properly.’ Or something like that. I mean, how *weird* is that?”

“Oh?” Kunikida cocked an eyebrow. “Well, isn’t that nice... Not that you’d be in any position to complain if the cop drop-kicked you for getting bomb threats thanks to your half-assed flirting with every girl you see! You’re a menace to women everywhere!” Kunikida yelled while sternly kicking Dazai’s chair.



“It certainly is a good thing, though,” claimed Tanizaki with a strained smile. “I was equal parts grateful and suspicious. I mean, it’s the police’s job to protect the city so that the citizens can work in peace, isn’t it? That got me wondering why the president started a business that even the police appreciate.”

“And that’s what we talked about at the pub today,” added Dazai with a smile.

“I see.” Kunikida crossed his arms. “Danger does come with the job. Starting an agency isn’t something you can do on a whim. But as you know, the president is a man of humanity and justice. Search the entire country, and you still won’t find someone as fit for the job as he is. Personally, I believe the agency’s founding was divine providence.”

Kunikida took a sip of his tea, then scowled at Dazai out of the corner of his eye.

“Speaking of the detective agency,” Kunikida continued with an acidic note in his tone, “I just remembered something—Dazai, what happened with that kid?”

“What kid?”

“The homeless one you took in yesterday,” Kunikida replied as he placed his cup on the table. “You mentioned you wanted to employ him at the agency. Were you being serious? Because that’s not something any sane person would do. Not only is he a total stranger, the boy’s also a dangerous skill user and designated beastly threat within the local ward. And you want the agency to hire him?”

“Heh-heh-heh. I’m more than serious about it. In fact, that’s why I came here today. Ah, I can’t wait.”

“Oh, I heard about that,” said Tanizaki, leaning forward in his chair. “This is the case where you had to catch a man-eating tiger that ended up actually being a street urchin boy with the ability to transform into a tiger, right? I can’t believe you guys were able both to solve such a bizarre case in under a day *and* take a skill user into custody without issue. You aren’t known as the best duo in the agency for nothing.”

“Oh, stop. You’re embarrassing me.”

“We’re not a ‘duo.’”

Dazai and Kunikida spoke at the exact same time.

However, the fact of the matter was that they were the most talented duo in the agency when it came to solving tough cases, and they had boasted a record of solving the most difficult cases ever since Dazai joined the company two years ago. Outsiders who didn’t know their personalities or how much they didn’t get along often thought they were the perfect pair. Ignorance is bliss.

“At any rate...,” Kunikida said while glaring at Dazai. “I’m against

the idea, but if you're serious about this, then you need to go talk it over with the president. If he agrees, then I won't say another word about the matter."

"Already done," Dazai replied, beaming. "He told me to come up with an entrance exam."

"Seriously? So you're saying he gave you permission?" asked Tanizaki.

"Yep. Just one thing, though..." Dazai placed his thumb to his lips as if deep in thought. "I still haven't thought of what I'm gonna get Atsushi to do for his entrance exam. Such a serious matter shouldn't be left to me to decide alone. Right, partner?"

Dazai sent Kunikida a sly smirk after he finished.

"Of course." Kunikida crossed his arms grumpily. "The entrance exam is an important rite of passage, a test of one's compatibility with the agency and the authenticity of their very soul. Furthermore, this newcomer is a designated threat to the local ward. One wrong move, and the agency itself could fall under suspicion for illegally harboring a dangerous beast. I can't argue with you if the president has given you permission, but we must be more thorough than usual with this exam. No way I'm letting you pull some idea out of your ass to test him."

"Then it's settled." Dazai tossed back the rest of his tea with mirth before standing. "Let's go. I've already called everyone to the agency's conference room."

"...For what?" Kunikida asked flatly.

"To get started on what you just said." Dazai stuck out his index finger to get everyone's attention and smirked. "Boss's orders. We need everyone's wisdom in order to determine what this newcomer—our new rising star—can do for the agency."

Dazai took in a deep breath, then declared:

"Let the first entrance exam trial meeting begin!"

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The Armed Detective Agency was a private organization made up of skill users. There were the investigators who solved client cases, and office staff in charge of gathering intel, handling client relations, and seeing to accounting matters. Although the agency didn't have a set number of employees, the usual staff totaled a dozen or so, including the president.

Almost all the investigators had some sort of skill.



Skill: ~~Use~~ **Use** ~~Shunichi~~ **Shunichi** Tanizaki

Skill: User: Maphles Kinkida

Skill: Use Longarm Hudaizai

Others had their own unique skills as well, which they used for their work. The Armed Detective Agency was a band of skill users who oversaw the twilight between the worlds of day—where the governmental authority of the police reigned—and night, ruled by the dark underbelly of society.

The agency was founded over a decade ago by the president after a chance encounter with a certain skill user. But that is a story for a later time.

This is the tale of the Armed Detective Agency's newest employee and the entrance exam that determined his suitability for the job.

Atsushi Nakajima—the night before his hiring.

\_\_\_\_\_

The Armed Detective Agency's office was located on the fourth floor of a reddish-brown brick building. Inside were an office floor, a reception area, a conference room, the president's office, an infirmary, an operating room, and a kitchenette. A spiral staircase for emergency use stood in the back, but everyone usually took the single, old-fashioned elevator.

The three agents got on the elevator and headed to the detective agency. It was nighttime; most employees were already making their way home, and only a few still remained in the office sitting under the bright, white fluorescent lights. One was writing a letter, another was reading a novel, and the last one was eating noodles. They seemed to have stayed by choice, rather than because of remaining work.

The seaside was visible from the office windows, and a merchant ship's steam whistle could be heard blowing a few times in the distance. Kunikida, Dazai, and Tanizaki casually waved and greeted the staff before heading into the conference room at the end of the office.

The room was already occupied.

"Oh my. Just look at what the cat dragged in. If it's an autopsy you're looking for, I'm afraid I've closed up for the day."

With her slender legs crossed as she sat, Miss Yosano lifted her head up from reading the newspaper in her hands.

Yosano was the agency's personal physician and a healing skill user, which was rare even on a global scale. She single-handedly took care of all medical treatment in the detective agency, and there was never a shortage of fresh wounds. An immensely capable physician who loved nothing more than performing surgeries and autopsies, Yosano would oftentimes try to operate on patients with even the smallest cuts or scrapes, thus making her far more frightening to her colleagues than any enemy. To make matters worse, her primary surgical tool was a hatchet.

"Dr. Yosano." Tanizaki, the first to enter, blinked in surprise. "What are you doing in the conference room?"

"What does it look like? I'm reading the paper," Yosano responded while flapping the paper in her hands. "I was really busy today, so I didn't get a chance to check the news," she added while she continued to read one particular column. "Another great article today, I might add."

"I never took you for the type who likes to read the paper..." Tanizaki said while taking a peek at the periodical. "So what's this 'great article' you're reading?"

"The best section in the newspaper: the obituary notices," she said with a cheerful smirk. "Death is the fairest judge of all."

"You can say that again," Dazai added, all smiles as he appeared in the doorway.

After the brief exchange, Tanizaki, Kunikida, and Dazai walked into the room and took a seat in that order. The hands on the wall clock made a resounding *tick, tick*.

"So what are you all doing here?" asked Yosano after taking her nose out of the paper.

"Heh-heh... We're having a meeting to decide on the next entrance exam," Dazai brightly replied. "Remember that tiger-boy from yesterday? Well, turns out we're going to come up with his exam democratically. I want to hear everyone's opinion."

"Democratically, huh?" Yosano raised an eyebrow. "How about we do the same thing we did for Tanizaki? How's that?"

Yosano glanced in Tanizaki's direction, and he instantly turned pale, shaking his head.

"I—I don't ever...want to be reminded of that again."

When Tanizaki was new, he had to pass what could be called a very harsh entrance exam. However, it was so harsh that all of Tanizaki's memories of that day ended up buried deep in his subconscious. Remembering what happened would only bring underlying trauma up to the surface.

“Anyway, this isn’t about me.” Tanizaki leaned forward. “Let’s keep this exam tame.”

“Ooh, check out this article,” Yosano interrupted while reading the paper. “‘MANY DEAD OR INJURED AFTER ILLICIT SHANGHAI HAIRY CRAB SUPPLIER GOES UP IN FLAMES.’ I bet that smelled wonderful. Maybe I’ll walk by the place on the way home.” She licked her lips.

“D-don’t you think that’s just a little much...?” Tanizaki looked disturbed. “Besides, Yosano, that paper’s from two months ago. It’s old. You wouldn’t be able to enjoy the rich fragrance of freshly cooked crab even if you went.”

“Oh, hey... You’re right.” Yosano checked the newspaper’s date and frowned. “Who’s the wise guy who left this old paper lying on the table? Tch. And here I was excited for my chance to cut up some bodies from the fire—living or dead—under the pretense of helping a legal autopsy.” Yosano tossed the newspaper aside in disappointment.

“Yeah, I don’t know how I feel about mutilating living people with a hatchet...”

Tanizaki, who frequently found himself under the knife, expressed the kind of sympathy only a firsthand victim could.

“Grilled crab is the greatest treasure of this world,” Dazai commented, completely missing the point.

“Dazai.” Kunikida finally spoke in a low tone. “Forget about the crabs. What happened to the meeting? I thought you said you called everyone to the conference room, yet Dr. Yosano seems to be the only one here.”

“Hmm...” Dazai peered up at the clock while tilting his head. “I did contact everyone, but the agents here are all so laid-back, y’know? It’ll probably take them a little longer to arrive.”

Crossing his arms, Kunikida stared at Dazai. “Yes, you’re one to talk, Dazai. You’re basically the king of Laid-Back Land.” Kunikida pouted his lips. “You said this was a meeting, but do you have any specific ideas on how you’re going to proceed?”

“Yeah, yeah, I already came up with a plan. Not even the Prime Minister of Meeting Procedure Land, Kunikida, will complain.”

Dazai then got out of his seat and began to write on the whiteboard in the corner of the room.

“Step one: exchange ideas.

“Step two: pick the most suitable proposal given.

“Step three: assign appropriate roles.

“...So? Rather systematic, wouldn’t you agree?” Dazai claimed while tapping the whiteboard.

“It is systematic...which is actually why I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” Kunikida frowned. “That part about roles especially worries me. This is you we’re talking about, after all. I’ll bet you

devised some sort of scheme to get out of any work at all. Am I wrong?"

"I'm offended. I would never be so deceptive. Surely my colleague Kunikida trusts me, right?" Dazai spread his arms wide, claiming innocence.

"Nope," replied Kunikida.

"Sorry, I don't believe you, either...", added Tanizaki.

"Never believed anyone less," said Yosano.

Dazai leaped out of his chair in an amused manner. "So cruel!"

"We'll be keeping our eyes on you. At any rate, let's not worry about step three for now. We need to start exchanging ideas," said Kunikida as he checked the clock once more. The only two agents missing were Ranpo and Kenji. The final decision would need the majority vote, meaning their presence would be essential, but a meeting to exchange ideas with the current members was more than doable.

"That's the spirit!" Dazai said with a smile. "If Kunikida wants to start, then let the meeting begin. All right, then... Any proposals?"

Dazai took a seat, then looked at everyone in rotation one by one. Each of the room's occupants exchanged glances, hesitant to speak up. They could go toe to toe with the most violent skill users while humming a merry tune, but even these veteran detectives weren't good at everything, and reading the situation was one such difficulty for them. When each agent in a gathering possessed an outstanding skill and unusual personality, one would have a better chance of finding treasure in the unexplored corners of South America than trying to guess what the other was thinking. However, the silence was soon broken.

"Oh, wow! Look at Tanizaki! Look at how he's glowing! He's just dying to speak up!" Frustrated, Dazai threw Tanizaki to the wolves.

"Huh? M-me?" Tanizaki pointed at himself, puzzled.

"I can see it! The radiant idea is illuminating your body! Go ahead. Tell us about that ace up your sleeve! Tell us about your cherished proposal that will make us jump out of our seats and clap! Our hearts are ready!"

"Please don't make this any more difficult than it already is!" Tanizaki cried out in a fluster. "Anyway, I don't think it needs to be some convoluted test. Why don't we just look at the requests we've received from clients and pick out something reasonable from there? I believe I heard that's what they did with you, Dazai."

"Oh! Good idea! Thanks, Tanizaki." Dazai proceeded to write "handle a case" on the whiteboard in black. "Any objections?"

"You already know the answer to that, Dazai," Kunikida said. "That would work if this were any ordinary newcomer. However, the

military police are under orders to put down the beast that's been terrorizing the district. In other words, he's wanted. The agency won't have any problem concealing his identity to an extent, but that doesn't mean we should toss him into the midst of chaos before he's even hired. Surely the president told you this already."

"They don't call you the president's top apprentice for nothing!" Dazai placed his hands on his cheeks. "The president essentially told me the same thing. Hmm... It was a very reasonable proposal, but we have to come up with a test that won't attract too much outside attention. Sorry, Tanizaki."

"Oh..." Tanizaki uttered with a note of disappointment. "Then... how about having him solve a problem within the agency?"

"Such as?"

"Hmm... Maybe like clearing a paper jam or cleaning the pipes?"

"This isn't a janitorial position." Kunikida furrowed his brow. "Besides, there aren't really any incidents at the agency that could 'test the veracity of one's soul.'"

"We'll come back to this one."

Thereupon, Dazai wrote "solve an in-house issue" on the whiteboard before adding a "?" at the end.

"Are we just going to sit here and criticize every single idea? We're getting absolutely nowhere," Yosano complained, resting her chin on her palm. She pointed at Dazai. "Dazai, you're the one who wanted to do this. Tell us your idea. Surely you've thought of something."

Dazai remained silent for a few seconds.

"...Heh-heh."

He giggled as if he had been waiting for someone to say exactly that. Then he slowly took a bundle of paper out of a paper bag and placed it where everyone could see. The sheets were crammed with sentences, but it was difficult to tell whether they had been scribbled quickly or by garden-variety terrible penmanship.

"Of course, I came prepared! Feast your eyes on the numerous foolproof plans I've devised!"

Everyone looked at Dazai in awe—except for Kunikida, who had seen this coming and scowled.

"My first proposal is a test that focuses on physical abilities and stamina. First, we'll take the train thirty minutes to the Yokohama city zoo and sneak in after closing. Then we'll throw our candidate into the Asiatic black bear exhibit and leave him in there overnight. If he's either defeated the bears or escaped by the time we come back the next morning, we'll hire him."

"Dazai," Kunikida intoned deeply as he glared at Dazai.

"If he reconciles with the bears, then we keep him on standby."

“Dazai.”

“But we would be completely in the wrong from the bears’ point of view, so we’re moving on to my next idea. This proposal focuses on thinking ability and problem-solving. There’s this old man in the Sixth District who’s so stingy you have to wonder if he was a piggy bank in a past life. Word has it one time his change was off by five yen, and he lambasted the clerk for two hours straight. We’ll have the newcomer come up with some reason to borrow a thousand yen from the old man.”

“Dazai.”

“And if he can keep playing dumb for a month without paying the man back, we’ll hire him.”

“It hurts just imagining that!”

“After that—”

Dazai continued flipping through his stack of paper until Kunikida stopped him.

“Wait, wait, wait. Are all the ideas you came up with like that? The hell do you think the entrance exam is? Besides, there’s no way you could avoid that old man for an entire month. The sheer stress would cause you to go bald.”

“In that case, we’ll have the newcomer borrow the money under your name,” Dazai claimed while staring at Kunikida’s crown.

“Don’t you dare!” Kunikida yelled while covering his head. “... *Ahem*. What I meant to say is, this kid is a potential agency member! There has to be something more suited to that! The exam should test a candidate’s sense of righteousness, his abilities, his knowledge, his morality!”

“Really? Okay, then how about this one. If he eats four pounds of sugar in under five minutes, then—”

“All your ideas are garbage! They’re just becoming more absurd as you go on! What is this, a circus sideshow? Tch. Surely there’s got to be someone out there with a better idea than—”

Just when Kunikida was about to tear his hair out...

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

...the door to the conference room flew open with a strange-sounding creak from its hinges.

“Sorry. I was plowing the field in front of my house and lost track of time. Check out the huge radishes I harvested today. You could kill a guy with one of these! Don’t worry. I’ll make sure everyone gets their share later!”

The lively, energetic voice belonged to a small-framed young man donning a straw hat and cotton overalls. The gloves stuffed in his pocket were soiled with fresh dirt, and to top it off, he was barefoot.

This was Kenji Miyazawa, the youngest agent at the detective



agency.

“Hey, Kenji! We were waiting for you!” Dazai was all smiles as he welcomed his colleague. “You remember why I asked you here, right? Well, let me tell you, it’s been one heated discussion! Come, Kenji, give us one or two of your brightest ideas!”

“I’ll see what I can do!” the young detective replied cheerfully before entering. His bare feet tapped against the floor as he cut across the room to read the whiteboard. Then he turned around to face the others.

“The exam needs to test whether he’s talented enough to join the agency, right?”

Kenji pondered for a few seconds before facing Dazai and raising his hand.

“Oh, I know!”

“Yes, Kenji?” Dazai pointed at Kenji, allowing him to speak.

“Get him to arm wrestle me! If he wins, he’s in!”

Everyone fell silent, their expressions dead serious. Even Dazai was left speechless.

It was an unattainable objective. Kenji’s skill, *Undefeated by the Rain*, granted him superhuman strength and made his body essentially indestructible by physically knocking back whatever hit him. He could effortlessly throw a car if he wanted to. In fact, he once wrestled three seasoned sumo wrestlers and simultaneously threw them in the air. No one knows if they ever hit the ground. Everyone in the room imagined the newcomer trying to arm wrestle Kenji until his arm got torn off and left him screaming.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea...” Tanizaki timidly spoke up, breaking the silence. His face stiff, he glanced around at the others.

But when he noticed the nearby Yosano mutter under her breath “...That could work” with a smirk, he immediately tried changing the subject.

“A-any other ideas?”

“Other ideas, huh?” Kenji repeated, unbothered. He paced back and forth a few times, deep in thought as his bare feet audibly tapped the floor. “I think most detective work boils down to putting in the effort one day at a time.” Kenji struck his palm with a fist before continuing. “I’m fairly certain the president would agree that it’s not about jumping immediately into action, going berserk on the enemy, and having a fairy-tale ending. So how about we have him plow the field next to my house little by little, and if that leads to a good harvest come autumn, then he can join the company. Sounds wonderful, if you ask me!”

Everyone’s gazes fixated on Tanizaki in silence—“Say something!” they seemed to be urging him.

“Uh... Y-yeah...” Tanizaki reluctantly gave an ambiguous reply. “We were with you during the first half, but...I think waiting until autumn might be a little too long. Right, Kunikida?”

“A-agreed.” Kunikida seemed startled when the hot potato was suddenly thrown to him.

“Oh... If you say so...” Kenji’s innocent, childlike eyes showed a hint of disappointment. “Then how about one of the more common rites of passage we use back in the countryside where I’m from?”

“Oh? What kind of ritual is that?” Tanizaki raised his eyebrows.

Kenji was from an extremely remote village deep in the mountains of the Touhoku region just past a stream that cut through the forest. Up until the day he was scouted by the president and brought to the agency two months prior, Kenji lived a simple life surrounded by cows and fields, which was why he may seem uncivilized to some.

“Back home, we had a young men’s association that would help out with general farm work. There were a few ways to become a member, but for example...” Kenji raised his index finger and continued, “...forecasting the weather.”

“Huh... Sounds neat. I guess the weather is very important to farmers, after all. So basically, if you correctly predict the next day’s weather without checking the forecast, you pass?”

“Not just the next day’s weather. An entire month’s weather.”

“...Pardon?”

“You predict the weather by checking the soil and the animals’ behavior. I can do it, too! Here: sunny, cloudy, sunny, sunny with showers in the morning and in the evening...”

After that, Kenji rambled on, forecasting the weather for an entire month. Unfortunately, though, everyone blanked out, and all that information went in one ear and out the other.

“Th-that’s really impressive...” Tanizaki finally spoke up. “Anything else?”

“If you can hold a conversation with a cow, you pass. Or a dog.”

“Your village sounds incredible, Kenji...,” Tanizaki muttered in blank amazement.

“Also, anyone who can summon rain gets a free pass. The same goes for people who can grow a sapling into a tree in a day’s time.”

“That’s a real top-notch group you’ve got back home!”

“If you build a community center in one night, you pass.”

“Who lives there, Hideyoshi Toyotomi?!”

“If you defeat a cursed spirit, you pass.”

“Those exist?!”

“Also...”

“H-hold on.” Tanizaki stopped him, unable to take any more. “I think we’re getting way off topic. Plus, I feel like if we listen to any

more of this, we're going to completely forget about the meeting, so let's stop there for today."

“Oh... Well, if you say so.” Kenji tilted his head to the side in a disheartened manner. Just then, Tanizaki turned around to find Dazai writing “Hideyoshi Toyotomi” on the whiteboard.

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The debate over the entrance exam had reached a fever pitch. Everything Dazai proposed, Kunikida shot down, while Yosano raised an objection to everything Kunikida suggested. And whenever Yosano brought something up, Tanizaki said, “Yeah, that’s a bit much...”

Everyone put their heads together and passionately debated the topic in an effort to select the best rookie for the agency...or at least, that was what they should have done. In reality, this bunch was simply far too eccentric to put out a proposal that could be considered even halfway decent.

“A rookie needs guts,” Yosano argued with a curl of her sensuous lips. “How about we do this: You all have pinkie fingers on your left hand, right?”

Everyone looked at their pinkies.

“We start from the left pinkie...and tear off one finger until we reach the pinkie on his right. If he can make it through all ten fingers, he’s in.”

“That’s way too cruel!” Tanizaki shrieked.

"All right, eight fingers, then."

“What kind of pointless compromise is that?!”

“Oh, come on. I can always just heal him with my skill,” Yosano said with a pout. “If you’re not gonna let me do that, then how about we file down his crotch and see how long before he cries? That could be the test.”

All the men in the room grabbed their crotches and leaped out of their chairs at the thought of the unfathomable pain.

“We’re not going to torture him!”

“Then how about he challenges me to a drinking contest? If he wins, he’s hired.”

“That’s hazing!” Tanizaki shouted back.

“Hey, Kunikida, you’ve been awfully quiet,” Dazai pointed out. “It’s about time for the star of the show to make their appearance, don’t you think? Please grace us with one of your stellar ideas.”

“...You would pretend to help someone before pulling the ladder from under them. I know you well enough that no praise of yours could motivate me. If anything, it gives me anxiety,” Kunikida said while glaring at Dazai. “*Sigh*. It doesn’t matter. How about this? If he

takes out Dazai, he's hired."

"Oh, wow," Tanizaki said in admiration while lightly clapping his hands together.

"...Anything else?" asked Dazai, peering at Kunikida from the corner of his eye.

"If he argues Dazai into silence and makes him reflect on all his misdeeds, then he's hired."

"Oh, wow! Good idea." Tanizaki enthusiastically nodded. "Anything else?"

"Yes, he could take Dazai...! And then, like, put him between two wooden boards or something, then slowly apply pressure on both sides and blow hot steam on his face. He could stab him with countless tiny needles with the occasional electric shock in between and whisper into his ear, 'This is all your fault. This is all your fault.' And after that, he could...!"

In a heated frenzy, Kunikida gestured as if he were hitting something in the air before twisting and shaking it. His eyes were bloodshot. Tanizaki, as well as the others watching in the conference room, were slightly weirded out.

"Um... I... I'm sorry," Dazai mumbled feebly. However, Kunikida didn't seem to hear him.

"But you wouldn't actually reflect on your misdeeds, right, Dazai?" Tanizaki asked.

"Nope," came the usual reply. Just then, there was a knock at the conference room door.

"Pardon my intrusion." It was a girl's voice, clear as a bell. "You all must be absolutely exhausted from such a long meeting. One of our regulars brought us a gift, so how about taking a short break and helping yourself to one?"

A high school-age girl walked in, her long, shiny black tresses cascading down her back. She was wearing a school uniform and held a tray of food in her delicate hands.

"Naomi!" Tanizaki lifted his head in surprise. "I thought you already went home."

"I was waiting for you so we could go home together."

Naomi gently smiled. Underneath one of her eyes was a beauty mark that gave her an alluring appeal beyond her years. Naomi Tanizaki, Junichiro Tanizaki's younger sister, worked at the agency's office when she wasn't at school. With a practiced hand, she placed a cup of green tea and a meat bun on the conference desk for each person there. Steam rose from the buns along with a delicious aroma; they must have been fresh out of the oven. She walked by her brother and leaned in so closely that he could feel her breath.

"My dearest brother," she said, a touch of heat in her long exhale,

“you’re looking ever so handsome, as usual.”

Naomi stroked the back of his neck with her fingertips. Everyone in the room pretended not to notice. Apparently, these two were blood-related siblings; Tanizaki had admitted as much before, and Naomi had made it no secret, either. Nevertheless, they looked nothing alike. Compared with Tanizaki, who had timid yet honest eyes and a smile always lacking self-confidence, Naomi had a certain sexiness that defied her young age. She had voluptuous lips and lashes so long you might expect to hear them when she blinked. Her eyes were large, like bottomless pits that would absorb any young man naive enough to peer into them, trapping them in a world of fantasy as all the blood rushed to a certain part of his body.

To make matters worse, she always tried to have some sort of physical contact with her brother, regardless of location or who was around. She would touch his ear during conversation, rub his thigh during work, and blow into his ear whenever he wasn’t paying attention. Tanizaki would start acting self-conscious every time, and his eyes would wander, but Naomi even seemed to enjoy her brother’s reactions.

“Oh, Big Brother, you have a piece of lint on your chest. Let me get that for you.”

Naomi softly traced Tanizaki’s collarbone with her fingernail. Of course, there wasn’t a speck of lint on his body. Tanizaki turned red and blinked uncomfortably. Everyone awkwardly looked away.

“Are you two actually related, though? How can two siblings live alone together and act like this?”

That was the question not a single person in the agency was brave enough to ask. Everyone firmly believed something was up, but they could never pry for fear that their hunch was right.

“Hey, Big Brother... I brought what you asked. It’s in my bag. Tonight, we could use it to—”

“Huh? O-oh yeah. Thanks.”

And that was exactly why no one could ask them what they were talking about, despite wondering about the meaning behind Naomi’s suggestive whispers and the fact that Tanizaki was looking at everything but her.

“These meat buns are amazing!”

Kenji, who was seated at the foot of the table, was the only one munching happily away at the meat buns Naomi brought. Appetite outweighed sex appeal as far as he was concerned.

“Hey, Naomi, how about helping us out a little while you’re here?” Dazai suggested brightly. “We’re brainstorming ideas for the rookie’s entrance exam.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful!” She placed the tray under her arm,



came here today for a reason,” Kunikida said, sternly furrowing his brow. “Plus, we’ve got minors here, too. Hurry it up. All that’s left for us to do is decide on an idea and delegate roles, right?”

“But we’re still missing someone.” Dazai scratched his head. “Ranpo’s not here, and we need everyone present before we can decide on the test. I wonder what he’s doing this late at night? Maybe he’s working on a tough case, and it’s taking longer than he thought...”

“Oh!” Naomi placed a hand on her cheek. “Actually, Ranpo’s in the office right now.”

“Huh?”

“I saw him when I was walking by a few moments ago. He was wrapped up in one of those puzzles that comes with the candy boxes.”

“That’s Ranpo for ya. Nothing fazes him.” Dazai proceeded to compliment Ranpo for whatever reason.

Ranpo Edogawa, twenty-six years old, was the Armed Detective Agency’s top detective and the brains of the operation. He possessed outstanding powers of observation and deduction for someone so ingenuous and simple in nature. Even then, he was impossible to figure out, and he yielded to no one. Ranpo was only willing to go out on a case so long as he alone solved it. Although he didn’t mean any harm, he would tell anyone they were stupid even if it was their first time meeting, and he never hesitated to give someone a pat on the head—victim, perpetrator, you name it. And there wasn’t a single case he couldn’t solve. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say he was the center pillar of the agency.

“I’ll go get him,” Naomi said before trotting out of the conference room. After watching her leave, Dazai said, “Everything should be okay now. There is nothing he can’t solve.”

“I agree, but is this really something worth bothering him over?” Kunikida asked reluctantly. “His brain should only be used for solving cases. There are plenty of difficult cases he could be cracking instead of spending his time on something as trivial as this.”

There wasn’t a single soul in the neighborhood who didn’t know Ranpo’s skill. Even the big shots from government organizations like the city police would beg him for help.

Skill User: Ranpo Edogawa Skill: *Super Deduction*

While most skills were supernatural events that bent the laws of physics, Ranpo’s stood out as extraordinary even among the best detectives—the *ability to see the truth*.

No matter the case or event, he could see the truth after nothing more than a single glance. His skill almost seemed like cheating, even.



The existence of such an ability would render any and all investigative organizations utterly meaningless. And yet, Ranpo possessed such a skill and used it to solve mysteries. The truth never escaped his discerning eye.

And that was precisely why no one could oppose him, which consequently made Ranpo even more arrogant. It allowed him to solve cases however he liked, even if that meant dragging other relevant parties down with it. After he departed the scene of a crime, he always left everyone involved mentally exhausted, despite having solved the case. No one could control the infallible genius...except for the president, whom Ranpo still earnestly listened to for some reason. He would get depressed if the boss got mad at him, and it brought him so much joy when he was praised. Nobody knew exactly why he was so obedient, but according to the other agents, "Well, you know how the president is. Guess it's no real surprise."

*Tmp. Tmp. Tmp.* Ranpo walked up to the conference room door with force in his step.

"Hey, folks! I see everyone's racking their brain over another pointless meeting," Ranpo quipped with a grin. "*Sigh*. What would you guys do without me?"

"We've been waiting for you, Ranpo," said Dazai, smiling back. "We're having a meeting about the entrance exam I mentioned to you earlier. Got any ideas?"

"I hate using my head for boring stuff," Ranpo complained. "And anyway, I honestly couldn't care less if this newcomer's got what it takes. There are two kinds of people in the world: those who cry tears of joy when I solve a case, and those who cry out of frustration!"

"You raise a fine point." Dazai nodded in agreement.

"But of course, my skill always leads me to the truth, be it a murder or even something as trivial as this. Besides, I'll be away on a business trip tomorrow, so I won't be able to take part in the test anyway. There was a string of killings in the Hokuriku region that I've been dying to investigate. But as a parting gift, I suppose I wouldn't be against using my *Super Deduction* to predict the course of this meeting, if you wanted."

Ranpo produced a pair of black-framed glasses from his pocket—old spectacles that triggered his skill, *Super Deduction*, whenever he put them on. Not a soul knew where he got them, but according to Ranpo, they had a long and distinguished history of working miracles. They looked like nothing more than a pair of worn-out spectacles to any ordinary person, though.

"Are you sure, Ranpo?" Kunikida asked, slightly flustered. After all, Ranpo never used his skill for anything unrelated to a case.

"Of course—"

Ranpo abruptly paused and took in a deep breath.

“—not. Did you really think I’d do that?”

The group nodded in unison. *You’re not wrong there.*

“You guys are out here busting every little brain cell you’ve got; it’d be a darn shame if I just solved the problem for you in a snap. Besides, you all ate meat buns without me, and that is unacceptable!” He pointed at the empty plates lined up on the table.

“Huh? But I thought you were stuffing your face with sweets at your desk...” Tanizaki sounded perplexed.

“Okay, sure, obviously I prefer candy and sweet buns, and I also like ordinary stuff like hamburgers and *omurice*, too! But it’s nighttime, see, and there’s nothing that grinds my gears more than smelling meat buns in the middle of the night and knowing there aren’t any around for me to eat!”

“Let me ask Naomi if there are any left.”

Tanizaki hurriedly got to his feet, then trotted past Ranpo and opened the door to the conference room. But as he was passing by, Ranpo quietly stared at him with strangely vacant eyes. After that, he faced forward once more before turning his gaze toward a stack of old newspapers in the corner of the room.

“Tanizaki,” Ranpo called out.

“Yes?”

Tanizaki turned around, but Ranpo didn’t immediately answer. Instead, he gently shook his head before at last saying, “Well, good luck.”

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Tanizaki talked to Naomi in the kitchenette and asked her to look for any leftover meat buns. On his way back to the conference room, he ran into Kunikida.

“Kunikida, how did things turn out?” Tanizaki asked.

“Dazai is handling the meeting. I told him I had some business to take care of and left.” Kunikida looked about to make sure there was nobody around before continuing. “More importantly, Tanizaki, how are things coming along with you-know-what?”

“Everything is ready to go.”

Tanizaki nodded, then held up the schoolbag he’d received from Naomi just now when they were chatting in the kitchenette. She’d also taken that as an opportunity to try to force herself on Tanizaki, but he managed to escape. Inside the bag was a large brown envelope.

“Tanizaki—you know what to do.”

“I do.” He nodded. “Everything so far has gone just as you predicted, Kunikida.”

“I haven’t been partners with Dazai this long for nothing.” Kunikida’s face twisted in utter and genuine revulsion. “My instincts let me know when he’s scheming something. My vision was flickering so much during the meeting that I almost fainted. I won’t let him have his way, though. It’s time for him to pay for his self-indulgence.”

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any, then we'll just have to make one ourselves."

A fake case to solve—in other words, a ruse.

Someone would create a fake problem, and the rookie, who happened to be there, would be asked to solve this problem to test his capabilities. The mood in the room made it clear that was the only option; everyone was getting sick of thinking about it. However, there was one person brave enough to object.

"Wait." Kunikida spoke up. "A ruse is all well and good, but there's a fundamental problem with this idea: Dazai."

He looked at Dazai, who cheerfully pointed at himself. "Me?"

"Yes, you. With this plan, we probably wouldn't be bothering anyone outside the company. Someone could simply cause a commotion and create the problem. This part of the plan is fine. However..."

"'However'...?"

"I want everyone to think back to what got us here in the first place." Kunikida stood from his chair, put both hands on the desk, and leaned forward. "The person who got us into this mess and invited the newcomer to join our agency was none other than Dazai. Even though said newcomer was a designated threat, Dazai didn't think to capture him or take him into custody. Rocks-for-Brains here only came up with the terrifying idea of letting him join the agency of all things because the idea just randomly popped into his head."

"Oh, stop. You're embarrassing me." Dazai smiled and scratched his head.

"That's not a compliment. At any rate, I am not advising anyone to reconsider. The president's already given it the green light. However, I know Dazai's nature more than I ever wanted to, and it is painfully obvious to me what he's doing."

Kunikida paused, then looked around the room before continuing.

"I'm determined to see this through, and I'll push all the hard work onto someone else.' Surely this is what you thought to yourself. Right, Dazai?"

Dazai gleefully smirked and nodded. "Looks like the cat's out of the bag now. I'm impressed, Kunikida."

"Your praise means nothing to me. In any event, I have been burned far too often because of how he does things. Forcing responsibility onto others, shifting it onto others, avoiding it—he flatters people just to kick the ladder out from under them. Whenever I vow to never be tricked by him again, I find myself somehow walking down the path he laid out for me. Thanks to that, I've been through so much over the past two years we've been partners: I've cleaned out drains in the freezing cold, fallen into the women's fitting room at a department store, and even been forced to drink so much

that I woke up in someone else's bedroom without any memories of the night before."

"You two have really done some interesting things together," said Yosano in shock.

"You're a strong person, Kunikida!" Kenji praised Kunikida, completely missing the point.

"Therefore, I'm convinced Dazai has come up with some sort of scheme so that he's the only one who doesn't have to do any of the hard work. He's shrewd—I'll give him that. What I'm trying to say is... Dazai, you're planning on getting someone else to do the entrance exam while you're doing nothing! Admit it!"

"Wow, Kunikida. You really like playing the victim, huh?"

"Whose fault do you think that is?!"

Dazai nodded a few times before responding. "But I understand why you're worried. Over the years, I have been avoiding boring, tedious work whenever I could. But it would be difficult this time to force the responsibility onto someone else under these conditions. This is a meeting, after all. It would be quite surprising if everyone's opinion somehow suited my needs."

"Really? I think it's quite the opposite," Kunikida said while crossing his arms. "For example, the meeting has pretty much settled on creating a problem that doesn't exist. In other words, we only need one unlucky individual to handle the ruse, and then you're free. Also, you're the one who chose the time and place for the meeting along with who would be coming, so I can't help but wonder if you predicted we would end up going with such a proposal. You waited until everyone decided on it because you calculated your scheme so that someone other than you would have to do all the work. Am I wrong?"

"You're really buttering me up today, Kunikida." Dazai audaciously smirked. "I see now. So you were on your guard this entire time, huh? All right, Kunikida, let's hear your proposal, then."

"I won't force you to do *all* the work, but at the very least, I want this to be fair," Kunikida stated. "I don't want any dishonesty. Whether the roles are easy or difficult, they have to be fairly decided upon in a way that everyone will agree with."

"Understood. That's a very convincing argument," Dazai said before looking at each and every person in the room. Then, out of nowhere, he added, "What do you think, Tanizaki?"

"Wh-what? Me? Um... I..."

Tanizaki panicked after suddenly being called on. He glanced at Kunikida, who stared back at him as if he wanted to say something. Tanizaki had been a timid person ever since the day he was born, and he tried to think through his confusion. There shouldn't be a problem

if he simply agreed.

"I... I think that's a great idea." Tanizaki managed to string some words together. "The entrance exam has always been difficult, so I think forcing roles on one another isn't going to make anything better."

"Then how about we do this?" Dazai clapped his hands together before continuing. "How about we let Tanizaki decide on how we're going to allocate the roles? You could go with ghost legs, or cards, or — Well, just choose something that's fair and square. That's how we'll determine who gets the grunt work. How's that sound, Kunikida?"

Kunikida silently shot Tanizaki a look. Tanizaki started to quietly panic once again; everything was going a lot more smoothly than he had imagined.

"Okay..."

Tanizaki pretended to think while trying to calm himself down. What should he do? He thought back to what Kunikida said when they discussed the matter. According to him, "*Dazai never directly says what he wants. He always gets someone else to say it for him.*" If Ranpo was the art of deduction itself in the agency, Dazai would be the epitome of manipulation. The marionette strings he used to tie down and control people's hearts were complex and abstruse. Nobody could see where they led. But he couldn't stall here.

"How about we draw strips of paper?" Tanizaki suggested with a forced smile. "We'll write numbers on them and have everyone draw one. The smaller the number, the more stressful role."

Dazai instantly agreed.

"That's not enough." Kunikida furrowed his brows. "Surely you know how tricky this man's fingers can be. They're frighteningly dexterous. He could pick a lock to a bank's safe with a single needle, so of course making fake slips of paper and switching them out would be nothing for him."

"Hee-hee..." Dazai placed a hand over his mouth as he giggled, bouncing in his chair. "I can't tell you how tickled I am to have Kunikida compliment me so much today."

"Stop laughing. It's creepy."

"Then why don't we do this?"

Tanizaki turned his gaze upon the old newspaper on the corner of the conference table—the one Yosano had been reading. "Let's use this old newspaper. It's from two months ago, so it'd probably be hard to prepare a fake one or write over it."

"Interesting..." Yosano murmured while dragging the old newspaper her way. "You've got a point there. I guess it'd be tough for even a magician to pull a fast one with this. But what exactly are you going to do?"

Tanizaki waited for a few moments before answering.

"We'll cut the dates off with the page number and fold them."

He gazed at the old periodical.

"As you can see, there is only one of each number on the pages. This newspaper starts on page one and goes to page forty. Plus, it would be hard to find the same newspaper from two months ago just lying around, so if we cut out the dates with the slips of paper, then you wouldn't be able to re-create these unless you called a business that collected and recycled old newspapers."

"Uh-huh."

Dazai cheerfully nodded. "That's a really good anti-cheating system for something you just came up with on the spot. What say you, Kunikida? Seems foolproof to me."

Kunikida glared at Dazai. "Nothing makes me more nervous than when you claim something's foolproof. Although I suppose I could compromise."

Tanizaki let out an inward sigh of relief. They made it past the first obstacle. The biggest hurdle, however, came next.

"All right, I'll make the slips we'll be using to draw," Tanizaki said as he began folding the dates of the newspaper. With nothing better to do, the others decided to pass the time by discussing the specifics of this "staged disturbance":

"What if we did it like in a fairy tale, where a princess gets captured by some bad guy? We could have the rookie just happen to be walking by when it happens."

"Hold up. Who gets to be the bad guy?"

"Isn't that why we're drawing slips of paper?"

"I want to be the villain! Sounds like a lot of fun!"

"No, you'd break the rookie's skull in."

"Well, I wouldn't mind that."

"Wait. Stop for a moment. We'll figure out who plays the villain through the drawing; there's still the damsel in distress."

"Who's going to play the princess?"

"I mean, we could decide through the drawing as well, but princesses are usually played by women, so..."

Silence.

"Me? Sure, but then I'm gonna split the new guy's skull open."

"I figured..."

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire..."

"Oh, I know! Kunikida could play the princess!"

"Are you out of your mind?!"

As Tanizaki was getting things ready, he imagined the tall Kunikida in a frilly white dress while flirtatiously saying, "Oh myyy! Somebody, do help me!" A rather repulsive notion, but one that kind

of suited Kunikida for some reason. Either way, that would be enough to blow the lid off the exam in an instant.

Tanizaki suddenly started to become anxious. Was this really going to work? Would this really make Dazai finally take responsibility just as Kunikida said it would? Kunikida assured him this would work as long as they stuck to the plan. And he said that most of all...this was for Dazai's sake as well. He claimed that no one would ever be able to defeat Dazai again after this.

According to Kunikida:

*"I was in charge of showing Dazai the ropes when he first joined the agency, but he'd already reached the height of his shenanigans by that time. He had already wrapped his marionette strings around countless people involved, and he even manipulated the moves our enemies made."*

*"The greatest detective in the agency is without a doubt Ranpo, but his intellect is used for controlling cases and crime scenes. Dazai, on the other hand, uses his intellect to manipulate people—something he uses to take a position of power over them. It would be no surprise if he led the agency one day in the not-so-distant future as the president's right-hand man. I get the feeling this entire ordeal with the rookie was the first step to that as well. We can't have someone as free-spirited and carefree as that in the agency. I am not going to let him keep shifting his responsibilities onto others. This entrance exam needs to be an opportunity for him to experience firsthand how difficult it is to hire and manage someone."*

*"That is why this entire exam needs to be done by Dazai and Dazai alone."*

This whole ruse was created for that sole reason. Tricking Dazai—this was the master plan Kunikida had come up with after being partners with him for two years.

Kunikida's plan went like this:

First, they would place an old newspaper in the conference room before the meeting.

Then, when they were deciding everyone's roles and things started getting complicated, one would casually suggest the necessity of everyone drawing slips of paper to decide roles, since not even the embodiment of scheming itself, Dazai, would be able to manipulate the results. Therefore, everyone would be randomly given their roles, which would be fair. Once that happened, without fail, someone would suggest using the old newspaper to make said slips of paper for the lottery. If, by any chance, nobody said anything, Tanizaki or Naomi would wait for the right moment and suggest it themselves.

Kunikida was going to shut Dazai down, he'd said. He continued by saying he was going to force Dazai to realize what it feels like to carry his own burdens and take some responsibility—both for his own sake and for the detective agency's.



Around the time the slips of paper were finally ready to go, Naomi stopped by the conference room with her schoolbag in her hand.

“Say, dearest brother, I was thinking about heading back home now. Is there anything you needed before I go?”

“Oh, Naomi.” Tanizaki looked overcome with relief. “We’re about to draw slips of paper to decide roles. Do you have a bag or something I can put these in?”

“How about this?” Naomi replied before taking a large brown envelope out of her schoolbag. Everything was going as planned. “It’s a leftover envelope from a school event. You’re free to use it if you want.”

When Kunikida had mapped out the plan, he proposed including someone who didn’t participate in the meeting. Dazai would surely see through Kunikida’s scheme if it were only him. On the other hand, having everyone in the meeting involved would run the risk of information being leaked. This was Dazai, after all. He could easily weasel the information out of someone—most likely Kenji. Kunikida’s partner in crime had to be the best of the best; thus, he ended up going with the Tanizaki siblings.

Tanizaki himself had no idea why he was chosen. Perhaps he was simply included with the Naomi package deal. It was starting to feel that way. When people asked Tanizaki for help, it was usually because anyone would do, or they needed his skill, *Light Snow*, for something. But skills were useless against their current opponent, Dazai...which could mean that he was chosen because he was a safe, passable choice.

However, Tanizaki felt he was mediocre at his job, held mediocre principles, and had a mediocre sense of justice, which made him a mediocre human being. He didn’t have the courage to talk back to or stand up to Dazai. Put simply, he was incredibly passive.

Tanizaki said he was just your average guy, and he was fine with that. *Besides, as the second-to-last ranking agent, what else is there to do besides follow whatever duties a senior employee gives me?* Tanizaki thought as he folded the slips of paper.

“I’m done,” he announced.

All the clamoring about the entrance examination suddenly stopped as everyone turned around at the sound of his voice. Lined up before Tanizaki were twenty slips of paper with the numbers “1” to “40” written inside. One might wonder why there were twenty slips of paper and not forty—and that was because the articles were printed on both sides of the paper. Therefore, the number “2” would be printed on the back of page one; the numbers “1” and “2” came as a set, as did “3” and “4.” And just like that, it was the very same up until “39” and “40,” hence why there were only twenty slips of paper.

Tanizaki stacked the papers together before carefully sliding them into the envelope. "Okay, guys. What order do you want to draw the slips of paper in?"

Kunikida crossed his arms and spoke up. "Tanizaki, you made the lots, so it would be logical if you went last."

"What about me?" Dazai asked while pointing to himself.

"You...might come up with a filthy scheme if we give you too much time to think. You go first."

"You don't trust me at all!" lamented Dazai as he drew a slip of paper from the envelope.

"Don't open it yet."

"Why?"

"Because we haven't decided on the roles. It wouldn't be fair to confirm who lost right off the bat, yes?"

Kunikida spoke with confidence, not even giving a hint that this was all part of his plan.

"That makes sense. I guess we should all open them together at the end." Dazai gripped the slip of paper in his hand. "More importantly, Kunikida, I just had the perfect idea for the entrance exam." He still had the slip held tight.

"And what's that?" Kunikida swiped the envelope out of Dazai's hands, then mixed up the contents before drawing a slip for himself.

"Well, you know that bomb I just happened to receive? I brought it with me."

Dazai pointed at the paper bag with the fake bomb he'd showed them at the café. Some woman had apparently sent it to the pub for him as a gift, but it almost escalated into a bomb scare.

"It'd be a waste if we didn't use it."

"You want to use a bomb?" Kunikida craned his neck. Yosano observed their exchange out of the corner of her eye and drew a slip of paper as well.

"Of course. A bomber will suddenly appear at the detective agency, barricading themselves inside while taking a civilian hostage. We would be able to see how the rookie handles such a risky situation. Obviously, the president will make the final call, but if he can disarm the bomb or persuade the bomber to give up, then the kid passes. What do you say? Sounds like a very detectivelike case if you ask me."

Kenji drew a slip of paper from the envelope. Usually, Ranpo would go next, but he wasn't going to be there on the day of the test, so he was relieved from this responsibility. The last person to draw from the envelope...was Tanizaki.

"Here you go, dear brother." Naomi held out the envelope to him.

Everything was going according to plan so far. It was smooth

sailing from here on out. A simple drawing was all that was left.

“So whoever draws the smallest number...plays the bomber,” said Tanizaki.

“Right you are,” Dazai casually replied.

Tanizaki sneaked a look at Kunikida, who subtly nodded back at him so faintly it could hardly even be seen. Tanizaki was already in this deep, so he felt he might as well let it play out until the end. He drew a slip of paper.

Kunikida’s scheme was extremely simple.

Fake slips of paper.

*The pile Dazai drew from was not the same as the one everyone else drew from.*

Of course, this was only possible because they had prepared multiple copies of the old newspaper and tinkered with the envelope. As one might expect from someone who had worked with Dazai for so long, Kunikida was able to predict that the roles for the entrance exam would inevitably be decided through drawing lots and that the point of compromise would be using an old newspaper to make the slips of paper to prevent cheating.

If they were unable to use the old newspaper or envelope, Kunikida had claimed, then that was that. His skill, *The Matchless Poet*, and Tanizaki’s *Light Snow* would be powerless before Dazai’s *No Longer Human*, since it could nullify any skill simply by Dazai touching them. Their only choice would be to prepare for the worst and pray to the god of chance to make the right decision.

But everything went well this time. Just as planned, Dazai drew from the dummy pile.

First, Tanizaki’s job was to get eleven old newspapers the day before, then make numerous folded slips of paper with the same page number and dates. Which is why yesterday, he asked an acquaintance who recycled old newspapers to bring him multiple copies of an old paper with the same date. He used these newspapers to create slips of paper with numbered pairs starting from “1” and “2” all the way to “39” and “40” (page numbers were printed on both sides of the paper as mentioned above, so each slip of paper had one number on each side of it).

Next, his job was to collect all pairs of “1” and “2,” along with pairs of “3” and “4,” before putting them into a small envelope. It was ten newspapers’ worth of “1 & 2” pairs and “3 & 4” pairs, thus coming to a total of twenty strips of folded paper. In short, this was a fake pile of lots, twenty strips of paper, to replace the original pile of everything from pairs “1 & 2” to pairs “39 & 40.”

The plan was to force Dazai to draw from this pile, giving him

only the chance to get a number from “1” to “4.” Whoever got the smallest number would lose, which meant Dazai’s loss had already been decided. In other words, he was going to get the role of the bomber. After that, Tanizaki would only have to switch piles again before everyone else drew a lot. There were nineteen slips of paper in the other pile, which started from the pair “5 & 6” and went all the way to “39 & 40.” Any number would end up being higher than what Dazai drew.

The piles needed to be switched out only twice. As long as that was done, then the rest of the scheme was extremely simple and extremely hard to discover—cheating with a high chance of success. That was why meticulous training was necessary for switching out the piles. That was where Naomi and Kunikida would come in. In the conference room, Tanizaki would pretend to mix the pile of twenty strips of paper, but he’d actually switch them out with the “1 & 2” and “3 & 4” pairs. After Dazai drew a slip, Kunikida would then switch out the pile to the “5 & 6” through “39 & 40” pairs when he had his turn.

Nonetheless, the envelope itself was prepared with a false bottom before the meeting, so switching out the pile itself wouldn’t be that difficult.

It was a rather simple mechanism. The false bottom with the fake pile had a string attached that would just need to be pulled to switch the piles. This was Kunikida’s ultimate weapon against Dazai that he had been laboriously preparing for well in advance.

All the traps had now been set.

Each detective—Dazai, Kunikida, Yosano, Kenji, and Tanizaki—was holding a slip of paper. Whoever had the smallest number got shouldered with the most burdensome work, which in this case would be the role of the bomber.

Tanizaki recalled the entire course of events. So far, everything had gone according to plan. Nevertheless, they were up against Dazai—a man who had been playing people, friend or foe, like a fiddle ever since he joined the agency. He was clever, and his behavior always made his intentions unclear as he led those around him into confusion and panic. His past was almost a complete mystery, and before anyone even realized it, everything was going down the path he laid. He was like a certain folkloric trickster.

Would such a trick work on Dazai?

“Okay, we’ll start with me.”

Dazai unfolded the old newspaper scrap.

“3 & 4”

“Huh...”

Dazai frowned.

It worked. Tanizaki caught himself before those words slipped off his tongue.

“Looks like you’re finally getting what you deserve,” Kunikida said to Dazai.

Despite being dragged into this scheme, even the self-proclaimed “average guy” Tanizaki felt good seeing the plan go so perfectly. Dazai often led Tanizaki around by the nose and pushed his responsibility onto him, albeit not to the degree that he did with Kunikida. While saying this was revenge would be an exaggeration, it still did feel good to think of this as a little payback.

Next, Kunikida unfolded his slip of paper: “7 & 8”

The mechanism he created to switch piles was working like it should. In other words, the second switch was successfully carried out before Kunikida drew his numbers. Kunikida waved his paper in the air while boasting.

“I beat you, Dazai! This alone has already brought me all the satisfaction I need.”

“Darn, I was really looking forward to seeing you cry while holding a bomb and acting like a madman...,” Dazai muttered in abject disappointment.

Yosano then opened her slip of paper: “27 & 28”

Next up was Kenji: “33 & 34”

Kenji, the youngest detective and most recent hire, had the best luck out of everyone. From Tanizaki’s point of view, while Kenji was the only agent younger than him, not once did he ever honestly believe he could beat him. Tanizaki was the only one left who hadn’t unfolded his slip of paper yet.

“Let me tell you a little something before you open that, Tanizaki,” Dazai abruptly commented.

“Yes?”

“At this rate, there’s no doubt I’m going to end up with the lowest number. Perhaps this is payment for my wild lifestyle. So I’ve accepted my fate and will come up with a story for a man who has lost hope in humanity and excitedly dreams of blowing himself up while taking everyone with him. But first...I need a favor.”

“A favor?” Tanizaki curiously tilted his head to the side.

“When you think of bombers, you think of people barricading themselves in buildings, and when they do that, they always have a hostage. If possible, I’d really like someone sweet and passive for that role—someone whose appearance screams *hostage*. I thought I might ask your sister to play the part. Would that be all right with you?”

Tanizaki looked at Naomi to his side. Neither startled nor puzzled,

she placed a hand on her cheek.

"I would love to, if you don't mind," Naomi replied while staring at her brother for some reason. Tanizaki had the feeling that something wasn't quite right, but he nonetheless gave a noncommittal "I mean...as long as Naomi's fine with it" and nodded.

"I'm glad you're on board. Now, go ahead, Tanizaki. Unfold your paper. Your glorious numbers await you," said Dazai.

The *faintest of smiles* played on his face.

Kunikida stood up almost simultaneously, knocking over his chair.

"Impossible," he muttered. "Tanizaki, open it!"

At Kunikida's pale-faced urging, Tanizaki unfolded his slip of paper in a panic.

"1 & 2"

"Wha—?"

"Oh, what do we have here? What are the odds?" Dazai grinned. "It appears the god of drawing lots is a mischievous one. I can't believe you drew a number even smaller than mine, Tanizaki. You have the worst luck."

Flustered, Tanizaki checked the date on the slip of paper. It was from two months ago, the same as all the other ones. This was without a doubt the same as the others Tanizaki had prepared. The way it was cut out was no different from how Tanizaki had cut out the others, either. This was clearly made from one of the eleven newspapers. But that couldn't be possible. There were only two piles. One contained twenty slips of the numbers "1" through "4," and the other contained nineteen slips of the numbers "5" through "40." Kunikida, Yosano, and Kenji most certainly drew from the latter with the bigger numbers, as did Tanizaki. There was no moment that the piles could have been switched out again. So how did Tanizaki get a slip with the number "1" on it?







one would expect from the possessor of *Super Deduction*, which could see all truths.

Most frightening, though, was the fact that Ranpo actually *wasn't* a skill user. He truly believed he was, but he merely possessed godlike powers of observation and deduction, which he subconsciously used. But the truth as to why and how Ranpo believed this was a mystery to all those at the agency.

"This is bullshit!" Kunikida yelled out in the pub.

"Come on, Kunikida... It's okay...", Tanizaki feebly pleaded.

They were at a pub not too far from the detective agency, one that stayed open late. Orange light radiated from the hanging lanterns as red-faced customers clamored like the roaring sea. On the family altar near the ceiling was a small *daruma* doll on display.

Kunikida and Tanizaki walked through the pub's curtain to have a review meeting and a reward for their hard work. In other words, a celebration half fueled by despair.

"Man, that was fun, huh?"

Dazai smiled while sampling his sake. He was tagging along for who knows why. Tanizaki, who was still underage, sipped on his soda. "But seriously, I just can't believe you found us out..."

"Heh. I've been scheming since you were in diapers," Dazai said with a chuckle, then tilted his sake cup. "But the reason you failed this time was because of Kunikida's mistake. Dragging his junior into this—especially when that junior was you—was too obvious. It made too much sense. A plan like that's best done solo."

Kunikida glared at Dazai, pouting. "When you're right, you're right," he muttered.

"But, Dazai, how did you do it? If you'd pulled a big number, then I'd get it, but how did you make me draw a one?"

Tanizaki drew from the pile of his own free will. The only way to make him draw a "1," you would need to make the last fifty slips of paper all "1"s. While he did convince Naomi to join his side, he still clearly didn't have any time to switch out the slips of paper after Kenji drew a "33" right before Tanizaki's turn.

"A true magician never reveals his secrets." Dazai mischievously placed a finger to his lips. "I recommend figuring it out for yourself before you even try deceiving me again."

*"I've been scheming since you were in diapers."*

Dazai hadn't been exaggerating. Kunikida then lowered his head to Tanizaki apologetically.

"Sorry, Tanizaki."

"Don't worry about it." Tanizaki smiled. "It was a good experience."

That was the truth. He had made it this far in life because he was easily swayed by others. He went along with Kunikida's scheme because he was asked to, and he was going to play the bomber because that was the role shoved onto him. Despite having a slightly bizarre skill, he wasn't great in combat like the other agents, nor was he especially cunning. Tanizaki didn't have any mortal enemies, nor did he have a dark past or any trauma. He was an ordinary guy. The only thing he really even wished for was his little sister's happiness.

Even then, he didn't care where the tide took him as long as he was in the detective agency. Therefore, he even planned on having fun with the bomber's role that was pushed onto him. Fortunately, nobody had ever rebuked him for being weak-willed.

*"Nothing wrong with being weak. Let the tide take you somewhere far away."*

Tanizaki thought back to something a former teacher had once said to him. Just when he lifted his head back up with a wry smirk, the waiter brought their food to the table.

"Sigh. We wasted an entire day for nothing," muttered Kunikida. "Tanizaki, have whatever you want. I know it's not enough to pay you back for all that lost time, but tonight's on me."

"Hooray!" cheered Dazai.

"I'm not paying for you."

Kunikida asked the waitress for another glass of sake before facing the table once more.

"By the way, we never got to finish talking about why the detective agency was founded, did we?" Tanizaki commented while picking up a slice of potato with his chopsticks.

"Oh, right..." After taking a taste of his sake, Kunikida let out a deep sigh. "The president rarely talks about his past or himself. He doesn't give much instruction, either. When the time comes, he'll tell us how the agency was founded." Kunikida stared off into space and continued as if he were talking to himself. "I'd love to meet the person who convinced the president to start it."

Dazai ambiguously smirked. Tanizaki then thought to himself that if it was someone that well acquainted with the agency, then it wouldn't be a surprise if they had already met the person. Perhaps it was even somebody they knew very well.

"But I bet you everyone's dying to know. Go ask the boss next time we're at work, Kunikida."

"Why me? You do it."

"All right, let's all draw slips of paper to deci—"

"I am never drawing lots again." Kunikida scowled at Dazai.

"How about we play a game where the four of us, including the president, draw lots, and the loser has to tell an embarrassing story

from their past? That could work, methinks.”

“Well, ‘methinks’ you need to shut up!” Kunikida yelled. “The only outcome I can see is me telling embarrassing stories about my past alone!”

He tossed back his sake, then lazily drooped his head. Tanizaki slightly bowed when the waitress brought them another dish.

“I ended up somehow helping you avoid taking responsibility today. It’s humiliating. I really thought I had you this time,” groaned Kunikida. “I don’t care how I do it. I just want to win and make you say uncle.”

“Ha-ha. All you had to do was ask, and I’ll say it as many times as you’d like. Uncle. Uncle... Now, I wonder what kind of food awaits us under this lid here,” Dazai said while reaching out for the plate the waitress left.

“By the way, Dazai, you drew a three, the smallest number after mine...which means you’re supposed to bring the new guy on the day of the test.” Tanizaki curiously tilted his head to the side. “Why didn’t you try to avoid doing that, too?”

“Uncle, uncle, uncle. That’s because during the meeting today I felt that Kunikida wasn’t just trying to make me pay for everything I do to him on a daily basis. It was like he also wanted me to learn something during this entrance exam, and, well, you have to show a little gratitude for people’s goodwill every once in a while.”

“Hmph. You’re just the absolute worst,” Kunikida spat before looking away as if to hide his expression.

Dazai dragged the plate closer and reached for the lid. As he glanced toward the back of the pub, he commented, “Huh. I feel like I’ve seen that waitress from somewhere before...”

He removed the lid, which instantly made a clicking sound.

“.....Hmm...?”

Underneath was not food, but some sort of bizarre, elaborate contraption and solid fuel made from a claylike putty. Sticking out from the contraption was a fuse with a cord that connected to the lid in Dazai’s hand. Stuck to the back of the lid was a scrap of paper that slowly fluttered down onto the table:

“I said to keep your eyes on me and me alone.”

Wrapped around the rim of the lid was a motion-sensor cable.

“.....Uhhh... Is this...what I think it is...? One of those things that goes boom if I pull the lid any more than this...?”

Face still frozen in a smile, Dazai turned to his colleagues. However...

“Huh...? Tanizaki? Kunikida?”

...they were gone before he’d even realized. Sensing danger, they’d bolted out of there like scared rabbits. All that remained were

Dazai, who couldn't even move a muscle, the bomb on a plate, and the other patrons, who began to realize what was happening and started to panic.

“...Uhhh.....”

Dazai pondered, looked up, looked down, thought about the position he was in, then considered what he ought to say next before murmuring feebly:

“...Uncle.”

It was the night before the new employee, Atsushi Nakajima, joined the agency—and the night had only just begun.

## THE UNTOLD ORIGINS OF THE DETECTIVE AGENCY

Around that time, there were rumors of a highly competent bodyguard in Yokohama. Give him a sword, and he could kill a hundred villains. Give him a spear, and he could take on an entire army. An all-rounder when it came to martial arts, he had a mastery of everything from *iaido* to jujutsu. The man was also well educated, spending his days off either reading or playing Go. Levelheaded and calm when it came to work, he always took pains to protect his client with a sort of lupine composure. If one had to name a flaw, it would be that he never worked with others on the job and trusted no one.

In short, a lone wolf.

He kept to himself to such an extreme degree that it made people think, *That guy doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell of ever working with a partner, much less as their boss.*

An untamable wolf with silver hair...

His name—Yukichi Fukuzawa.

This brief tale is a record of one man's struggle, of his growth—  
—and of parenting.



Fukuzawa looked extremely surly that day. The weekend crowd rolled back like the tide as he strode down the avenue. Even cars stopped as he walked across the pedestrian crossing, even though their light was green. All of this was due to the sullen aura radiating from his expression.

However, he wasn't exactly in a bad mood. He was drowning in self-loathing. His client had been assassinated, and it was all very sudden. As a bodyguard, Fukuzawa had two main types of work: contract jobs where he would provide safe guidance during times of peace while rushing over to help during emergencies, and one-off bodyguard gigs protecting someone or something for a day. The client killed this morning was from a regular contract deal. She was a certain company's president who he'd sworn to guard only a few days prior.

They had never talked outside of work. Fukuzawa made it a point

to avoid getting personally involved with his clients, so he didn't know anything about her as an individual, nor did he have any inclination to. However, he was once asked if he wanted to become a full-time guard. Hating the idea of working for a specific company and having subordinates and colleagues made it easy for Fukuzawa to instantly decline the offer. Nevertheless, if he had stayed by her side as her personal guard, then perhaps he could have changed her fate.

From what he heard, the assassin pushed the president out of her office window earlier that morning. There was already proof who did it, which led to the perpetrator's swift arrest.

Fukuzawa arrived at said location, a reddish-brown brick building relatively close to the harbor. The structure stood on top of a slope and seemed fairly sturdy for such an old building. As he entered, he saw yellow crime-scene tape surrounding the ground right under the president's office.

The wind was strong that day, causing the tape to flutter in the wind. Fukuzawa averted his gaze. While the victim's body had already been taken away for examination, there was no hiding the enormous bloodstain on the ground. Fukuzawa checked his emotions at the door, then passed by the crime scene, walking under a sign that said S&K CORPORATION. Following that, he got on the elevator to the president's room.

"Hey, thanks for coming all this way. If you could give me just a minute, I'll be finished here shortly."

In the president's office was the secretary wrestling what appeared to be a pile of documents—not something one would expect to see where a murder just took place. The office was big enough to fit around thirty people if they were squeezed in tight. But instead of people, the place was crammed with documents. The desk and floor were drowning in a sea of paper with almost no sign of what they once were. They all appeared to be important documents as well. The secretary, a sickly-looking man dressed in a black coat and a crimson necktie, was lining up some of the papers across the room. He stared at the field of paper, pulled a few files out, and returned them to the bookshelf before lining up some more documents.

"What are you doing?" Fukuzawa naturally asked.

"See these documents here? I'm sorting them," the pallid man replied. "Because I'm the only one familiar with them."

It was hardly a serviceable explanation, and Fukuzawa was not any closer to understanding. But, well, he figured it had something to do with the man's job. Whether sorting documents on the day your boss was killed was disrespectful or simply good work ethic was something Fukuzawa couldn't decide, but it reminded him that a horrific event had just occurred.

“I am terribly sorry for your loss.” Fukuzawa bowed. “We lost a great person today... I heard she was pushed out this window here?”

The president’s office boasted views of the city of Yokohama. The wide window she was allegedly pushed out of was currently closed.

“It was a professional hit.” The secretary’s gloomy expression turned even more fraught. “The president’s sudden death is a matter of great regret for the company. She was something of a mentor or a governess to me, having plucked me from my former job and made me who I am today. I believe the best we could do for her is uncover the truth and bring the criminal to justice.”

The secretary indicated the room next door with his gaze.

“The assassin has already been captured. He was caught by one of the guards on the first floor when trying to escape after the murder and is currently being held in the room next door. Forensics checked his fingerprints against the criminal database and discovered they matched those found on the back of the president’s clothes.”

“What?” Fukuzawa uttered in astonishment. “Is the suspect still next door?”

“He’s very quiet, so quiet you might think he was sleeping. Almost as if he’s given up.”

There was a reason why Fukuzawa was so surprised. Yokohama assassins were extremely dangerous compared with other cities. Yokohama, the city of demons, had an influx of military parties from around the world working together after the previous war. In the name of governance, they waved around their extraterritorial rights, and each created their own autonomous region as they slowly encroached on Yokohama territory. Therefore, Yokohama was gradually turning into a lawless district even worse than it had been during wartime. The security forces—the so-called city police—were somehow still functioning, but the military police and coast guard, among others, were essentially inoperative. Yokohama was now a lawbreaker’s paradise and a melting pot for criminals, murderers, illegal foreign capital, and rival underground organizations.

To make matters worse, there were even skill users, whom Fukuzawa dealt with on a daily basis. Nevertheless, if there was a hit man who killed the president of a major corporation in Yokohama, anyone would naturally consider the possibility of it being a skill user.

A small number of people existed in this world with unusual, paranormal abilities.

The average person would typically never even come into contact with a skill user, hence why such individuals were considered nothing more than rumors or urban legends. However, bodyguards for important people, such as Fukuzawa, were very familiar with them, along with the crimes they committed. While Fukuzawa was a master

of the martial arts, he was not a skill user. Whether he would be able to defeat a professional assassin unscathed would be solely dependent on the flow of battle. What alarmed him, though, was the thought that the assassin might be a skill user. If he was, then tying him up with a little rope in the room next door would hardly be of any use. It would be like storing a highly powerful explosive.

“I would like to see the assassin.”

“Of course. Be my guest.”

Right as Fukuzawa was about to take a step toward the room next door...

“You say, ‘Be my guest,’ but...”

There was no path forward—literally. Around 95 percent of the ground leading to the room next door was monopolized by the neatly stacked, organized documents. No human would be able to walk through this. This was a job for some sort of eight-legged rescue-bot.

“Mind if I move some of these?” Fukuzawa asked, pointing at the documents.

“Oh! Stop! Don’t touch them!”

But he was immediately denied by the secretary, who raised his voice for the first time since they had met.

“The future of the company depends on these extremely important documents! A single print streak could hurt the company down the line. I don’t even want to think about losing any of them! Please find a way past them without touching or shifting them! I know someone as talented as you can do it!”

Fukuzawa stopped just short of uttering, “Uh... Excuse me?” It wasn’t a matter of whether he could do it. Fukuzawa was a martial artist, not an acrobat. The only open spots on the floor were narrower than the width of his foot.

“Out of curiosity...why are you stacking the papers all around the room like this?”

“A legitimate question. Allow me to answer. I believe that the assassin’s objective was to steal or perhaps destroy these important documents. My theory is that some criminals sneaked in to get their hands on these files and put us out of business, but someone caught them—the president. Therefore, they had to kill her to keep her quiet. That’s why I have to check everything.”

It made sense. The president’s office wouldn’t be a very convenient place to assassinate the company’s boss. There were guards, and the assassin would draw suspicion. But it would make logical sense if the objective was not the president’s life but the documents in her office. It would only be natural for the secretary to want to look over the documents immediately if they were actually the motive.



“How about returning some of the files to the shelf for a moment so I can get by?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.” The secretary shook his head. “Every file you see here was purposely lined up in a specific way, which is important in finding out what the criminal was after. By date, by department, by importance... The room itself is a part of the puzzle as well. I learned this technique before the president took me in, and I am the only one in the company who can do this. There are rules for putting the documents back on the shelf as well, and if we break those rules even once, it takes us one step further from the truth behind the president’s murder.”

Understandable—but at the same time, incomprehensible. Regardless, the secretary’s expression was dead serious, so Fukuzawa was more worried about causing trouble by moving the documents, rather than the reasoning behind it. He felt like an amateur, knowing nothing about how companies worked. He couldn’t even imagine becoming the president of an organization and putting so much effort into paperwork, human affairs, and contracts. But if a specialist in the field claimed that this was how things had to be done, then perhaps he was right.

Fukuzawa was never even planning on objecting. He was the one at fault, after all. Had he known his client was in danger and protected her, then this tragedy would have never occurred, and the secretary would have never been painstakingly lining up documents and looking through them with such desperation. The secretary was fulfilling his duty, and therefore, Fukuzawa had no choice but to keep his mouth shut and fulfill his own.

It was around five steps to the door to the adjacent room by Fukuzawa’s quick eyeball estimation. Given all the legwork he was used to, he could perhaps make it in two steps. One step would be halfway to the door, while the other one would have him landing right in front of it. Unfortunately, he would undoubtedly trample some life-changing documents this way. His first step would most likely rip the paper in half, which would only serve as another blot on his record as a bodyguard.

Fukuzawa decided to first retreat to the office entrance before tensing his muscles and leaping forward. His first step landed him on a decoration on the bookshelf lined up against the wall. From there, he used the vaguely dome-shaped ornament along with his momentum to leap once more. He landed with only his hands on the guest chair slightly away from the door before coming to a complete stop. He was holding himself with only his arms and keeping his trunk from even slightly shaking, which displayed a sense of balance that even masters of the martial arts rarely possessed. From there, Fukuzawa slowly

stretched out, placing his toes in the space between the nearby piles of documents. After that, he used one leg and one arm to keep balance while he stretched for the door. When he grabbed on to the doorknob, he held it like a jujutsu practitioner reaching around his opponent to grip the back of his collar. He then turned the knob with only the strength of his fingers. After making sure the door was just barely open, he used the doorknob to support himself before lunging off the chair. Fukuzawa swiftly landed with both feet on the floor in the room next door so he could slide in through the slight crack he created, and he hooked a finger on the door frame to keep himself from falling over backward. And like that, he retired from the office while not even moving a single document.

“Wow!” exclaimed the secretary in the background.

*That wasn't “wow”-worthy*, Fukuzawa thought; he'd felt a slight tingle go down his spine when he landed on the chair. Despite being indifferent to what others thought of him, it would still be somewhat frustrating to mess up and ruin one's reputation due to something so ridiculous. At any rate, he was able to make it to the next room over.

After throwing open the door, he found the assassin. The man was sitting, and he was of a smaller stature than Fukuzawa had imagined. The assassin's hands and feet were bound, and the thick, dark sack over his head prevented Fukuzawa from being able to see his face. The man wouldn't be able to escape like this, let alone even scratch his nose. Tied around his arms and legs was iron wire in addition to the rope. It would be nearly impossible to snap no matter how monstrously strong the person. Needless to say, a smaller hit man like this wouldn't have a chance. The assassin wore an extremely ordinary navy shirt with work pants and leather shoes. There was no indication they ever saw combat. He didn't appear to be any more than a run-of-the-mill bandit who was good at sneaking into buildings.

Any ordinary guard would think that...but Fukuzawa held a different impression. This was the reception room. The only items in the room were a simple bookshelf, a table to discuss business, and a painting. Fukuzawa walked around, purposely making sure his footsteps were heard. The moment he'd entered, the assassin's head had twitched slightly. In other words, he wasn't sleeping.

Fukuzawa made his way to the wall behind the hit man before immediately slamming his palm against it. *BAM!* An explosive roar echoed throughout the room, but the assassin didn't even react. Neither did he flinch nor turn around. He was serenity itself. He wouldn't be able to see Fukuzawa, either, due to the sack on his head. Fukuzawa could instantly tell this guy was no amateur. He knew more about assassins than the average person, since they were also his business competitors as a bodyguard. Unlike Fukuzawa, whose job

was to protect, those who killed were ever changing. Their attacks and weapons were unpredictable. Therefore, he had to make sure his information—the MOs of well-known dangerous hit men—was up-to-date at all times so that he could quickly respond to a sudden attack, even during times of peace.

Fukuzawa observed the hit man. He wouldn't be able to guess at his name or ability based on what he could observe in that moment. There was nothing especially peculiar about the man's appearance that would hint that he was a skill user. However...

Fukuzawa turned his gaze to a small desk in the corner of the room. There lay what appeared to be the assassin's tools of the trade.

There were two old pistols and holsters, which were worn but nicely taken care of. Along with the guns sat some change and a piece of wire to pick locks. That was it. Fukuzawa looked back at the diminutive assassin once more. As suspected, he was still as motionless as ever. Normally, people wouldn't be able to sit still without fidgeting even a little, but this man was different. He was extremely relaxed, despite being tied up and unable to see.

Fukuzawa picked up the fountain pen that was on the desk. After removing the cap, he began lightly drawing lines on a notebook that was there. It still had ink. Fukuzawa lightly pressed the pen against his left hip. Then he grabbed the pen with the fingers of his right hand while holding the cap in his left hand against his hip. After that, he spread his left leg shoulder width apart and got into a stance as if he were wielding a sword. Both arms were tucked in while he took an oblique stance. From then on, there was only silence.

The once unmoving assassin stiffened up. After steadying his breath, Fukuzawa took a big step forward with his right foot, unsheathing the fountain pen with a fury.

A single step, a single beat.

Still tied to the chair, the assassin hopped to his side in an attempt to dodge Fukuzawa's strike. The chair slammed against the ground with the hit man, making a dull echo. After witnessing the event, Fukuzawa brought his right foot back as if he were drawing an arc, then began sheathing the fountain pen while straightening his back.

"Don't worry. It's just a pen."

Fukuzawa capped the pen and returned it to the table. Now it was clear. The hit man really couldn't see what was happening around him. If he could see through the sack, he wouldn't have jumped to the floor to dodge Fukuzawa's pen strike. But he didn't even flinch a moment ago when Fukuzawa slapped the wall right behind him.

What was the difference? Could he sense the bloodlust? Fukuzawa made sure to strike with an intent to kill, something the assassin must have felt on his skin before throwing his body to the ground to dodge.

He wouldn't be any ordinary assassin if that were the case. He must have survived countless bloodbaths to react like that. Surely only a select few could hire such a talented assassin, even in Yokohama, a city rife with unusual skills and schemes since the war's end. Under no circumstances would he ever fail to kill his target, which was like breathing to him; thus, payment would have to be eye-poppingly high.

But if that were true, that would still leave one question unanswered. An assassin killed his target the moment he was discovered by pushing her out the window with his bare hands, and yet he was caught by the guards as he attempted to escape? Was such a thing even plausible?

"What happened? Is everything okay?" the secretary asked from the office next door.

"Everything's fine," answered Fukuzawa. "So... You asked me here because of this man?"

"I would like you to accompany me as we take him to the police," replied the secretary. "As you can see, he is not being compliant. He has been keeping his silence the entire time. I want to bring him to the police station, but they are apparently short on manpower at the moment, so they said they could only send two officers over. What do you think? Would two officers be enough to escort him back to the station?"

"Probably not," Fukuzawa replied without missing a beat.

The secretary's concerns were valid. The assassin may not pose any threat since he was tied up, but the moment the police untied him to transport him, he could kill one or maybe both of them in the blink of an eye. Calling Fukuzawa for help was a wise move. Fukuzawa personally felt guilty for the president's death. While far from an act of vengeance, he felt that bringing the criminal to justice was the least he could do.

"This man is waiting for his chance to escape. It'd be wise to transport him before he tries anything," mentioned Fukuzawa. "Mind if I take him out of the room?"

"Of course," the secretary said with a smile. "Just please make sure not to step on any documents."

"..."

"..."

That wasn't happening. Fukuzawa anguished over how he was going to convince the secretary until...

"Greetings!"

It was an energetic voice, reminiscent of a clucking chicken. Fukuzawa turned around to find a boy standing in the entrance to the office. He appeared to be around fourteen to fifteen years old with

long eyelashes and almond-shaped eyes. He wore a rustic cape with a schoolboy cap, while an old-fashioned flat satchel hung around his waist. His short hair was scraggly and uneven; he must not have had a mirror handy when he cut it.

“Whew. Some crazy wind we’re having today, huh? I know some people say go where the wind blows, but don’t you think this company could’ve chosen a better place to build their office? It reeks of salt from the ocean, it’s all the way up on a hill, and it feels like you have to go through a maze just to get here! What was the president thinking?! This is exactly why Yokohama’s no place to live. Oh! Also, I ran into a seagull on the way here. Good thing they’re so nasty, huh? It grossed me out so much I ended up giving it one of my rice balls before I could stop myself.”



The mysterious boy said all of that in one breath.

With a big smile on his face.

Right in front of the president's office.

"...Huh?" the secretary inanely spluttered.

There was perhaps no better way to sum up everyone's feelings than that one single utterance.

"You've seriously never heard of a seagull before? Freaky-looking rats with wings, those things. They must've done something real horrible in a past life. I mean, have you ever actually taken a deep look at their eyes? You can literally see the madness! Anyway, not to change the subject, but I'm one rice ball down, so I'm getting pretty hungry. Got anything I could eat?"

"Excuse me? Uh, um... Excuse me?" The secretary was absolutely baffled.

It stood to reason. The young boy was mirthfully rambling on until he suddenly saw something in the room and shut his mouth. His almond eyes surveyed his surroundings before creasing even further.

"Hmm... Looks like you've got your hands full."

Fukuzawa came back to his senses. Who was this boy? He seemed like nothing but trouble.

"Eh, not that it's any of my business. Anyway, could you give me the paper? Oh, is it somewhere in the pile? You expect me to find it? Sounds like a real pain in the neck. Hey, Mr. Secretary, how about you find it for me while you're busy killing time? Besides, I'm not interested in the fingerprints in this room."

Each thing he said was more bewildering than the last, and some things didn't make sense at all. "Killing time"? "Fingerprints"? The boy began to walk, heading toward the center of the room—toward the center of the ocean of documents. Right as the bottom of his foot was about to step on the first wave of papers—multiple documents with the company seal that looked like contracts with other companies...

"Ack! Wait, wait, wait! Stop right there! Do you have any idea how many years it took to close those contracts?!"

...the secretary grabbed the boy by the shoulder, barely stopping him in time. The boy stared at him, puzzled, then took a moment to deliberate.

"Nope," the boy replied before beginning to walk once more.

"Ahhh! Stop that!" the secretary shrieked as he desperately snatched up the documents. The boy's foot landed right where the documents once lay.

"See? You can do it if you really put your mind to it," the boy said with a smirk.

“What is wrong with you?! Regardless of the tragedy that occurred here today, this is still the president’s office! Authorized personnel only!”

“I know,” the boy admitted nonchalantly. “But I’ve been authorized. I was told to come in for an interview today. Isn’t it obvious?”

*An interview?*

“O-oh... You’re the applicant. I do remember the president mentioning something about conducting an interview for an apprentice office clerk...”

An apprentice office clerk? This destructively disobedient kid?

The boy claimed it was obvious he came in for an interview, but Fukuzawa was taken by complete surprise. He simply figured it was some sort of gremlin or troll who had shown up to make some demands now that the president had passed. The kid stood out like a sore thumb.

Fukuzawa turned his gaze to the secretary, who was still arguing back and forth with the boy near the entrance. He wanted to help, but he was standing by the door to the adjacent room, far from the entrance. The sea of paper on the floor blocked his path, making his only option to observe the proceedings.

“Sheesh, just look at the mess you made here. I get that you didn’t want anyone to search the room, but...this? Adults puzzle me. What a puzzling world we live in!”

“P-please stop talking nonsense!” the secretary screamed in falsetto.

Fukuzawa’s curiosity was sparked, for he saw a hint of dismay in the secretary’s pale expression.

“I understand why you’re here,” the secretary continued, “but our company has no time for that right now! The president was assassinated. Therefore, your interview must be postponed. I have to find which documents are missing and report it to the authorities before the suspect is turned in to the police—before they hook ’em and book ’em! Now please just go. Run along, now.”

“For the last time already—I *know*,” the boy complained with a pout. “Do you enjoy stating the obvious? I came to get my certification. You know what I’m talking about, right?”

“‘Certification’?” the secretary repeated. “Oh, that government-issued document for job searching, yes?”

So this young man was probably receiving government aid to find employment. Ever since the end of the war, unemployment and juvenile delinquency continued to be a pressing issue even in this major city. Therefore, the government had a system to fight back against unemployment through aiding minors who wanted to work.



The boy must have been using the program. In other words, he needed a piece of paper issued from the company's president to prove he'd come there for a job interview, and then he had to turn that in to the government so he could keep receiving financial aid and information.

"I'm sure it's somewhere in here, but..." The boy glanced around the room. "Look, I don't have time for this. Hey, Mr. Paper Pusher, can I just shove these useless documents out of the way already?"

"You may not," the secretary firmly declared. "The very way in which the documents are lined up is part of a crucial methodology for determining the perpetrator's motive, and I am the only one in this company who can—"

"Uh-huh."

The boy wasn't listening. Instead, he nodded as if in understanding and began rapidly picking up the documents around his feet. But before long, he got sick of it and decided to start randomly knocking the papers out of the way with his fingers to clear a path.

"Ahhh!" the secretary screamed in agony. "S-stop that this instant! I—I forbid you to touch even a single page more! It took me five hours to line up those documents!"

"Sure, but I still need to find *my* document."

"Then be quiet, go downstairs, and wait! I'll search for it later."

"Yet another obvious lie," declared the boy, albeit for reasons unknown. "It's fine. I'll find it myself. It won't even take a second."

Not even a second? Around a hundred documents were systematically lined up in the room. It would take more than a quick glance to check them all, so how was he planning on finding one specific sheet of paper so quickly?

"The president was pushed out this window, huh?"

Before anyone even realized it, the boy was standing by the large-framed window and inspecting it with a discerning eye. The secretary was frantically lining up the documents once more. Thanks to the kid's rash behavior, around a tenth of all the documents in the room were now scattered about without a shred of sympathy for the one who had to clean them up. Reorganizing everything was undoubtedly going to be a painstaking task.

"Kid." Fukuzawa couldn't help but speak up. "How do you plan on finding a single sheet of paper in this mess?"

"Wow, old guy. Didn't think you could talk." He cheekily raised his eyebrows. "You've been so quiet the entire time I've been here; I thought you were a statue... Anyway, it's a government certification, so it has a seal on it, and the special paper they use is thicker than your normal official document."

"Old guy"...

Fukuzawa was about to counter with "I'm only thirty-two years

old!" but he furrowed his brows, more curious about the last part of the boy's sentence.

The paper's thickness? So that was why it would be easy to pick out? But would someone even be able to spot it? It seemed as if it would still take a lot of hard work and patience to find a sheet of paper with such a small difference if it was still buried underneath all these documents. However...

That was when it hit Fukuzawa. The boy had a hand on the window—the wide casement window the president was pushed out of. Outside, the sky was blue. Weren't there supposed to be strong winds today?

"Oh, look! A parade!" the young boy cheerfully yelled as he flung the sash all the way up.

All at once, the documents began to take flight as if they had come to life.

"Ahhhhhh?!"

A white bird spreading its wings; the cool, fresh air forming a vortex—it was like something out of a fairy tale.

...Unless you were the secretary.

"Wh-wh-wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

"Aha, here it is!"

The boy grabbed a document lying on the desk. It was the only one barely fluttering in the whirlwind that came in through the window. The paper being relatively thick, its weight kept it from really going anywhere. It was clear why he opened the window now. Fukuzawa was impressed by just how stubbornly he refused to do anything the situation demanded of him.

"What do you mean, 'Here it is'?! Arghhh! I'm going to have to start all over again!"

The secretary tore at his hair, almost on the verge of losing his mind, but the boy showed no remorse. In fact, he was smiling.

"It's not a big deal. All the documents are still here, after all."

The air in the room instantly grew tense.

"...What?" The secretary looked back at the boy.

"None of the documents were stolen. The president wasn't even killed by a hit man. I mean, you know that. After all, you're the one who killed her, Mr. Secretary."

"...What?"

The secretary tilted his head to the side, mouth agape.

"...What?"

The secretary tilted his head to the side, mouth agape.

"...What?"

The secretary tilted his head to the side, mouth agape. His head

was almost completely perpendicular to the floor.

“Why did you just say the same thing three times in a row? I swear, adults make absolutely no sense sometimes. It’s painfully obvious that the one behind this was the secretary and that he framed the hit man, but the old guy over there won’t even do anything. A neglect of duty is what that is. If my mother were here, she’d already have the criminal tied up and tossed out the window!”

Fukuzawa was unable to keep up with the kaleidoscopic changes and too bewildered to even change his expression. The president wasn’t killed by the assassin? The secretary standing in front of them was the real culprit?

“That’s ridicu—”

Fukuzawa was barely even able to begin the retort before stopping himself. There was something bothering him—a feeling deep inside him. The assassin’s weapon was a pistol. He was a seasoned hit man who could sense bloodlust even without being able to see. Would someone this skilled use his bare hands to push the president out the window and leave fingerprints on her clothes? And how would he have been caught by one of the guards?

“Get it now, old guy?” The boy smirked with satisfaction as if he could read Fukuzawa’s mind.

“Wh-why do you look so serious, Fukuzawa? Just get rid of the boy! I’ll raise your payment, so please don’t let him mess things up more than he already has. The fate of the company—”

“Kid, I understand why you doubt that the hit man over there is the culprit.” Fukuzawa had already regained his composure. His expression was like a waxed mirror without a single ripple or smudge. “But the victim’s clothes had the assassin’s fingerprints on them. All ten fingerprints are there in a position as if he pushed her. How would you explain that? You may be just a child, but I won’t allow you to call the secretary a murderer without sufficient evidence.”

“You’re joking, right? What is this? A test? Do I get points for every obvious detail I list in the end? *Sigh*. The city really is a mystery to me.”

“Let’s hear the evidence,” said Fukuzawa with a little force.

From his point of view, he was simply trying to express a little sincerity. However, the air in the room instantly grew tense, and it felt as if the temperature had dropped a few degrees. Any ordinary street thug would have cried and run off if they heard that voice.

“Oh... Yeah, okay.” The boy’s expression turned solemn, and he closed the window. “The first thing the secretary did was innocently tell the president to look outside in order to lure her to the front of the window. Once she let her guard down, he pushed her out.”

“Absurd...”

“This place is authorized personnel only, right?” continued the boy while ignoring the secretary seething with anger. “No matter how good of a hit man he might be, it would be impossible for him to reach the window without the president noticing. I mean, the desk has a clear view of the entrance. Plus, if the president fought back, the fingerprints wouldn’t be positioned as if he *pushed* her out the window but rather as if he *threw* her out. Otherwise, it would be unnatural. But there were ten fingerprints on her clothes, right? I heard you two talking while I waited outside the room. That means the president didn’t feel like she was in any danger until the moment she was pushed. In other words—”

“It was someone she knew.” Fukuzawa finished his sentence.

Just who was this boy? He was very observant. While he flouted every behavioral norm imaginable, he could process all the necessary information. But that alone...

“Your argument could be more convincing,” claimed Fukuzawa. “The president could’ve coincidentally been standing in front of the open window when the assassin sneaked in.”

“So she had it open on such a windy day?” The boy furrowed his brows. He had a point.

“Even then, that isn’t enough to prove it was someone she knew,” asserted Fukuzawa. “There’s something called common courtesy in the adult world. Mistakenly treating someone you just met as a criminal has consequences, even if you are joking.”

“Yeah, I get it! I get it! Enough.” The boy puffed out his cheeks. “Come on, who cares about manners? I’m telling the truth, and that’s all that should matter. Anyway, as I was saying... The reason why the hit man’s fingerprints are on her clothes is because the secretary forged the evidence. My father once told me that fingerprints were easy to falsify. Mr. Secretary, you used to be a public prosecutor or something, weren’t you? After all, ‘hook ’em and book ’em’ is actually popular jargon among police, surprisingly enough.”

Now that he mentioned it, the secretary did say something about being scouted by the president at his last job.

“Look at how easy it is: You make a mold of the hit man’s fingerprints with putty or something, then just put it in a plastic—”

“P-preposterous!” Spit flew out of his mouth as the secretary yelled in rage. “Even if I did know how to fake fingerprints, I couldn’t possibly take a mold of the hit man’s fingers without being killed! Fukuzawa, I’ve heard enough. Just get rid of this brat for me.”

But Fukuzawa didn’t say a word. He silently stared at the boy across from him, who then smiled back.

“You’re kinda sharp, old guy. Anyway, how the secretary got the mold of the hit man’s fingers was simple. He was the one who hired

the assassin.”

*The employer?*

*The one who hired the hit man wasn't a third party interested in overturning the company? Then why is the hit man even here?*

“The assassin won't listen to anyone unless it's an order from his employer. Plus, the employer would be able to get his fingerprints without even rubbing putty on his fingers. He could get the hit man to hold something made of a soft material and have him come to the building at a specified time.”

“Wait. This hit man isn't your usual street thug. He'd need to be paid an obscene amount of money. Your average office worker wouldn't be able to afford him.”

“Then don't pay,” the boy said impatiently. “You could just tell the hit man to come here for a meeting or to discuss payment. Then all you need to do is get his fingerprints and make up some sort of excuse to get him to come on another day. After that, you can have your guards catch the hit man once he figures out it's a trap and tries to escape. Then, bam. Saved yourself some money. You can't beat free. Even cheaper than the boxed lunches they sell at the train station... Man, all this talk about food is making me hungry. Can I go grab something to eat?”

“I'll treat you to whatever you want after this, but finish talking first,” Fukuzawa replied patiently.

“Tch. Fiiine. The reason he hired a high-level hit man was probably because they're tight-lipped. I mean, as you can see, he isn't telling us who hired him, and he probably still hasn't even figured out he was set up.”

It made sense. The more qualified and expensive the hit man, the harder it would be to get him to sell out their employer. That was what made them so expensive, after all. On the job, Fukuzawa had crossed blades with a few assassins before, but the highly skilled ones never betrayed their employer. There were even some who, after being captured, committed suicide with poison that they had hidden on their person.

So the secretary used this to his advantage?

“But, hey, I'm sure he'll talk once he knows he was tricked, so how about asking him yourself?”

Fukuzawa instinctively looked back. The hit man was on the other side of that closed door, still tied to that chair on the ground.

“L-lies! Everything you say is a lie!” screamed the secretary. “A murderer's confession is inadmissible! It would be no better than a delusion at worst and an assumption at best! If you truly believe I was behind this, then prove it!”

“Ha-haaa! I was waiting for you to say that.” The boy's lips

mischievously curled. "People who ask for evidence during a murder are usually the ones who did it. Hmm... If you need proof, then how about these piles of documents? The reason you've been lining up these papers was so that nobody could come in here. Why, though? Because there's something in here you don't want them to find. After all, you still have evidence to forge even after killing her. I mean, it would be unnatural if there were fingerprints on the president's clothes but nowhere else in the room, wouldn't it? You're doing this to buy time."

"That's your evidence?"

Fukuzawa placed a finger on his chin and began to ponder.

"That's a lie! I refuse to let someone call me a criminal for simply arranging some papers! I was organizing these! Or are you saying you can prove that wasn't what I was doing?"

"Sure am." The boy nodded as if it were obvious. "When I first walked in, I switched out one of the documents with a guide on pinworm removal when you weren't looking, but you didn't even notice. What happened to your special methodology with how you had to line up the documents in a certain way?"

"Wha—?"

The secretary couldn't even manage a single word; it got stuck in his throat. Fukuzawa's gaze turned sharp. "Is he right?"

"He, uh..."

Fueled by rage, Fukuzawa quietly took a few steps toward the secretary.

"Th-this is a misunderstanding!" the secretary cried. "I—I just didn't feel like bringing it up at the moment! I was planning on giving him a stern warning later for his prank, so I let it go for now, but—"

"See?" The boy ducked his head. "I *didn't* switch any of the documents."

The secretary instantly stopped breathing. His pale expression got even worse until he was as white as snow.

"What's the meaning of this?" Fukuzawa took another step forward.

"Th-this is, um..."

"I didn't know the late company president very well, but she really trusted you. Said you were a talented secretary, and she was so glad she hired you. Why did you do it?"

"N-no... I didn't. She..." The secretary took a step back, utterly overwhelmed. "I was nothing more than a capable secretary to her. That was it. But for me...that wasn't enough."

All of a sudden, Fukuzawa heard a thud from the room next door. He turned around in surprise and violently threw the door open. The room was empty. The chair was on the floor, but its legs where the

rope tied around were snapped off. All that was left was the chair itself—*the assassin was gone*.

“Get down!” Fukuzawa screamed out as he took another step farther into the room. Lowering his hips, he slid a leg across the floor, drawing an arc to turn his body before ramming his shoulder into the opened door. There was some resistance. The assassin, who was hiding behind the door, let out a suppressed groan. Fukuzawa then pulled the door while reaching for the hit man, but nobody was there. The hit man wasn’t on the floor, either. He had leaped into the air, almost touching the ceiling as he dodged Fukuzawa’s grasp. Still in midair, he kicked off the wall and got far away from the door before kicking off the ground and creating even more distance between them. With the sack still on his head and his arms tied behind his back, the assassin lowered his stance as if he were a wild animal. All he could use freely were his legs, yet he was able to evade Fukuzawa’s preemptive strike with no sight or hands. Fukuzawa unconsciously clenched his teeth.

“I don’t want to fight you,” said the assassin through the sack on his head. His voice was muffled; it was high for a man’s voice but low for a woman’s, and it projected well.

*A boy.*

Fukuzawa didn’t reply. Hardly even leaning forward, he kicked off the floor and closed the distance with a technique known as *shukuchi*—a bit of footwork that used the martial artist’s body weight to instantly bring them into range with their opponent. From an outsider’s perspective, though, it would probably have appeared as if Fukuzawa disappeared and teleported in front of his opponent.

After covering several yards in the blink of an eye, Fukuzawa reached around and grabbed the back of his opponent’s collar, but the assassin didn’t even try to resist. Instead of fighting it, he jumped backward with it, pulling Fukuzawa and himself near the wall. By the wall was a desk with a fountain pen, a notepad...and the assassin’s pistol. While being pushed, he reached back for his gun. That was his plan all along. However, it would be impossible for him to use it properly with his hands tied behind his back, Fukuzawa determined. He kept hold of the assassin’s collar and decided to slam him against the wall. The desk was knocked over, sending stationery all over the room. With his opponent against the wall, Fukuzawa pressed his elbow against the assassin’s chest, holding him in place like a thumbtack. The assassin’s hand holding the gun creaked and cracked as it was smashed between his back and the wall. There was almost nothing he could do with the pistol in this position.

“Drop the gun,” demanded Fukuzawa. “You may be my business rival, but you’re only guilty of trespassing as of now. You’d get off

easy.”

“I don’t need forgiveness.” The hit man’s voice was close to a murmur, since his lungs were being crushed. “There is no forgiveness in this world. There is only retaliation—revenge against those who betray you.”

The assassin then lifted his feet off the ground. Even Fukuzawa wouldn’t be able to support the young man’s weight with only one arm. The assassin’s back slid against the wall to the floor before he suddenly twisted his body around completely, hips-first. He immediately fired his gun from behind his back. There were two shots.

“Guh...”

Fukuzawa turned around. Two bloody holes were carved in the secretary’s chest in the next room over. Blood gushed out of the wounds, dyeing his chest crimson. The assassin had shot the secretary—with his hands tied behind his back.

The secretary looked at Fukuzawa one last time, his expression twisted in agony, before drawing his last breath and collapsing. The hit man’s shots were unbelievably accurate. Despite not being able to see and having his hands tied, he was able to precisely hit his target. To top it all off, he paid no attention to Fukuzawa in spite of the fact that they were in the middle of battle.

*“There is only retaliation—revenge against those who betray you.”*

Fukuzawa faced the assassin, then slammed him against the floor. He kicked the gun into the corner of the room.

“You bastard...!”

He ripped off the sack covering the assassin’s face. He was young, with short hair that had a reddish tinge to it. The boy’s dark-brown eyes were frighteningly vacant, void of even a fragment of emotion. The young assassin didn’t say a word; he stared back at Fukuzawa.

Fukuzawa suddenly recalled a rumor he had heard about a young redheaded hit man who wielded two pistols and coldly killed his targets while never showing any emotion. His skill with a gun was supernatural, and he could fire from any position and still not miss. It was as if he could see the future. He was a living nightmare for people like Fukuzawa whose job was to protect others.

That young assassin’s name was something like...*Oda*.

Fukuzawa grabbed the assassin’s collar, then wrapped his other arm around the boy’s neck and put him in a rear naked choke, restricting the blood flow to his brain via the carotid arteries. If this kid was *that assassin*, then leaving him conscious in this room was no different from letting a cat play on the control panel to a nuclear bomb. The boy looked back at Fukuzawa with lifeless eyes—not the way one would expect a boy to look at the person choking them unconscious. Before long, the assassin quickly passed out without even



showing any signs of resistance. He probably wasn't interested in anything other than shooting the secretary. Only after making sure the assassin was unconscious could Fukuzawa finally let out a deep breath.

"So that's the hit man?"

Fukuzawa turned around toward the voice coming from the other room. "Call an ambulance. And the police," he ordered.

"Wouldn't the police be enough? I mean, the secretary's already dead. More importantly, I'm out of a job now, so could you help me out?"

Fukuzawa's head was spinning. What was wrong with this kid? What just happened?

"Call an ambulance first!" Fukuzawa stood up and began to walk away.

"Hey, don't just leave me here. What happened to taking me out to eat? You said it like I could go wherever I wanted and eat whatever as much as I wanted. That's what you meant, right? You meant we could talk about my situation while we eat, right? Right?"

Fukuzawa somehow managed to keep his legs from giving out from underneath him.

"You—"

The young man with cropped hair beamed, radiating innocence and mirth.

"The name's Ranpo Edogawa. Don't you forget it!"



Fukuzawa felt as if he were watching a nightmare play out before his eyes. The boy, who introduced himself as Ranpo Edogawa, was eating red bean porridge on his dime. And it wasn't just one or two bowls, either.

They'd stopped at an old-fashioned café relatively close to where the murder took place. There were a few other customers present, and they kept glancing in Fukuzawa and Ranpo's direction. Fukuzawa had to fight against the impulse to go around the shop explaining that this kid just followed him here for some reason. Ranpo had already finished his eighth bowl and was currently digging into his ninth. Fukuzawa was sitting in suspense, but not because he was worried about how much money he had left. He had enough. The problem was

---

"Hey!" Fukuzawa just couldn't hold it in any longer. "Why aren't you eating the mochi?"

—in each finished bowl of Ranpo's porridge sat several white mochi, entirely untouched. He was eating only the red beans.

"Because they're not sweet."

*Not sweet? It's red bean porridge. The stuff is more mochi than red bean.*

If he were simply looking for a sugar rush, then he could have gotten sweet bean jelly, mashed sweet potatoes, or even a sweet bun. "Hear that? Those are the wails of the mochi you left behind" is what Fukuzawa wanted to say, but he held his tongue. There was nothing more meaningless than wagging one's finger at another's food preferences. It was hard to watch, but it wasn't as if Ranpo were committing any crimes. He didn't want things to get worse by saying anything, either. Just imagining Ranpo peeling off the bread of the sweet bun and eating only the red bean paste inside made him shudder. If Fukuzawa criticized him for being wasteful, the boy would call him a cranky old guy, he was sure.

When the police finally arrived at the crime scene, Fukuzawa and Ranpo explained the situation. It was a rather complicated statement, and having no interest in talking, Ranpo tried to casually leave. Nevertheless, Fukuzawa somehow convinced him to stay and explain what happened in the president's office. Fukuzawa and Ranpo would have been put in a bizarre position if they made one wrong move, but they ended up being let go almost immediately after telling their side of the story. One of the officers happened to know of Fukuzawa due to his being a well-known martial artist, which fortunately helped them receive the police officers' complete trust. One condition was that they would still have to come to the station to tell their story again, though.

When the police checked the scene of the crime, they discovered a plastic mold of the assassin's fingerprints in the secretary's overcoat pocket. When another squad searched the secretary's house, they apparently found an instrument used for duplicating fingerprints from samples and another mold in the shape of the assassin's fingerprints on both hands. All the evidence backed up Ranpo's claim.

Fukuzawa's client was finally able to rest in peace thanks to Ranpo, which is why Fukuzawa was indebted to him. In other words, he owed him one. Fukuzawa, though, still couldn't comprehend how things ended up like this. He mulled it over. Subjectively speaking, all this boy did was disrupt things, but he was objectively solving the case through reasoning. It was an utterly brilliant deduction. He was able to pick out the real criminal after getting only a quick glance of the scene of the crime and people involved. Even then, Fukuzawa still wasn't able to understand Ranpo's actions, or put more precisely, he still couldn't make sense of what had occurred.

What in the world...happened back there?

"Hey, kid." Fukuzawa spoke up.

"Mmph?"

Ranpo looked back at him with a mouth stuffed with red beans. "Drink your tea," Fukuzawa wanted to respond, but he held back once again. Ranpo would probably just claim that it wasn't sweet enough, just like the mochi. Not having tea with sweets was beyond Fukuzawa's comprehension, but since he believed that it would be rude to talk ill of others' preferences, he merely said "Okay" and moved on.

Fukuzawa was more interested in what had happened in the office, but he stopped himself from asking "What was that back there?" because he knew he wouldn't get an answer from the boy like that.

Instead, Fukuzawa reworded his question. "When did you realize the secretary was behind it?"

"From the very beginning," Ranpo replied, clumsily chasing after the red beans in his porridge with chopsticks. "He was wearing a coat, right? You don't need a long overcoat to organize documents. In fact, your sleeves would get in the way."



Fukuzawa nodded. The tool used to create fake fingerprints of the assassin was in the overcoat pocket. He must have needed the large coat pocket to hide something as bulky as that tool.

“Do these sorts of things happen to you often?”

“Sometimes,” Ranpo replied while swallowing down some red beans. “At the workplace, on the side of the street... I used to always stick my nose into stuff that bothered me, but people would just treat me like a nuisance or think I’m weird. After a while, I got tired of it. *Sigh*. Good grief. The adult world makes my skin crawl.”

Ranpo shook his head and frowned in disgust.

“Do you dislike the adult world?”

“I hate it. It makes absolutely no sense.”

Fukuzawa felt there was something off about Ranpo’s truly appalled expression. It was odd that it “made absolutely no sense” to this boy. Fukuzawa felt the urge to point out that there were also many wonderful things in the world, but he yet again kept it to himself. He didn’t feel as if he had the right to tell such fairy tales.

*“Fukuzawa, you dare betray us?”*

*“Was our oath to the welfare of the nation nothing more than a lie, Fukuzawa? Did your words have no meaning?”*

Fukuzawa gave up the sword that day, but he could feel its weight against his hip. He wasn’t going to make excuses saying that it was morally just, but...

Suddenly, he noticed that Ranpo was staring at him. It was as if his clear, deep eyes were peeking into Fukuzawa’s head—as if he had access to the memories hidden in the depths of his brain. Fukuzawa averted his gaze, then said the first thing that came to mind.

“You said you came for an interview earlier. What about school?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Ranpo answered, annoyed. “I was attending the police academy and living in the dorm until they kicked me out less than a year ago.”

“They kicked you out?”

“The rules were a pain in the ass. Don’t leave the dorm after curfew, no buying sweets, wear these clothes, follow these rules. And the classes bored me to death. Dealing with other people is such a hassle, too. I ended up getting into an argument with the warden and exposed all his past exploits with women, so he kicked me out.”

That would certainly do it.

“I’ve been moving from place to place since then. When I was working and living at a military post, I told everyone about the chief’s embezzlement, so I got expelled. When I did errands at a construction site, I got sick of the corporate hierarchy and ran away. When I was working in postal delivery, I found an unnecessary letter and threw it

away before checking what was inside, so they fired me. But who would even want a useless letter? Nobody. That's who."

Ranpo made it sound as if it were an accepted fact while Fukuzawa inwardly groaned. Living at a military post, working at a construction site, and delivering mail... They really did sound like jobs this kid wouldn't be able to handle.

*"The city really is a mystery to me."*

The city—why did he leave his hometown?

"What about your parents back home?"

"They're dead." A faint hue of sorrow flashed across Ranpo's face. "Died in an accident. I don't have any siblings or relatives, either, so I came to Yokohama. My dad told me to go to the Yokohama Police Academy's principal for help if anything ever happened to him. They apparently knew each other, and my dad was kind of well-known for a police officer. But, well, I got kicked out of the academy pretty quickly."

"What was your father's name?"

When Ranpo told Fukuzawa, he was slightly taken aback. It was a name even Fukuzawa knew. There wasn't a soul who worked in his business who didn't.

The man was a legendary detective. The "Headless Officer" case, the "Moonlight Phantom," the "Cow Head Incident"—he helped solve several difficult cases that shook the nation. His powers of deduction and observation were so extraordinary that people called him the Clairvoyant. He was highly respected and praised.

There were rumors that he retired and moved to the countryside, but...he passed away?

"He probably wasn't amazing enough to be known to the public or anything, though. He could never beat my mom when it came to solving mysteries or reasoning, so she always got the upper hand on him when they argued back home."

Ranpo also mentioned his mother's name, but Fukuzawa wasn't familiar with it. Apparently, she wasn't a police officer, detective, or even a criminal psychologist, but just an ordinary housewife. And yet, she was sharp enough to be able to run circles around the legendary Clairvoyant. She must have been one incredible woman.

"Anyway, so that's why I'm here." Ranpo pushed aside a bowl with leftover mochi in it, then said, "I have absolutely no idea what adults are thinking. Having said that, I have no home to return to, and my interview disappeared. I've got nowhere to go."

There it was again. Fukuzawa felt as if something was off. "I have absolutely no idea what adults are thinking," the kid said—and something about how that came across seemed vaguely wrong.

A naive only child raised by genius parents... This kid was

different from the others. There was something about how his brain worked that was...extraordinarily different. Fukuzawa didn't know how else to clearly express it, but it processed information more quickly than others. Most people would probably chalk it up to powers of deduction, but...even if the average person couldn't understand him, surely the reverse wouldn't be possible, that he couldn't understand them? There was a decisive discrepancy.

*"Isn't it obvious?"*

*"Do I get points for every obvious detail I list in the end?"*

Did this kid not realize he was special? That would somewhat explain his odd behavior. Ranpo knew the secretary was the criminal the moment he walked into the office, but the reason he didn't speak up was because in his head, he thought the adults in the room all knew that as well. That must be why he kept rambling on about himself rather than the murder. Or perhaps it was because he had simply lived a sheltered life in a bubble with his parents and no one else. But even if this hypothesis were true, how would one explain that to this kid? "You're special. You have something that others don't." But why? And how different exactly was he? How could it be proved?

"What's wrong?" Ranpo carefully stared at Fukuzawa, but Fukuzawa just quietly shook his head.

What would even be the point of explaining things anyway? He was a stranger, after all. Fukuzawa and Ranpo's relationship was to end here at this café. They just happened to run into each other at the scene of the crime, but their lives would soon take different paths once again.

Fukuzawa felt as if he had no right to give his opinion, let alone lecture the kid. There was an invisible boulder deep within him. It was hard, cold, and only grew heavier, squeezing his heart into a vise grip every time he got close to connecting with another human being.

The boulder was his past.

Wasn't that the cause of such tragedy and bloodshed in the first place—getting involved in others' lives while believing everyone shared the same ideals?

Fukuzawa had had enough of getting tangled up with others.

"Good work today." Fukuzawa got out of his seat. "I'll inform the police that you were the one who solved the case. I'll also recommend you get compensation. If all goes well, you might even be able to slip your way into the police force... I know losing your parents is hard, but I'm sure you'll manage to find somewhere you can succeed. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Ranpo suddenly grabbed Fukuzawa's wrist as he went for the check.

“...What?” Fukuzawa looked at Ranpo, who motionlessly looked right back at him.

“...That’s it?” Ranpo asked.

“What?”

“That’s it?” he repeated. “Isn’t there, like...you know? Something a little more tangible? Don’t you get, like...a lump in your throat when you see a wayward fourteen-year-old boy who lost his parents, is jobless, and has nowhere to go?”

Fukuzawa looked at Ranpo. Then he stared at the café table. From there, his eyes wandered to the nine bowls lined up on top.

“I sure do,” admitted Fukuzawa. “I still can’t believe you ate nine bowls of nothing but soupy red beans.”

“Oh, this was nothing,” Ranpo said boastfully, then almost immediately shook his head. “Wait! That’s not what I’m talking about! I’m talking about mutual aid—the spirit of helping one another! You can’t take connections like this for granted... Wait. Taken for ‘granite’? ‘Granted’? Uh...”

“‘Granted,’” Fukuzawa replied. “You’re right. Nine bowls of red bean porridge isn’t enough to help a boy in trouble. Here. Take this.”

Fukuzawa pulled a white business card out from his coat.

“What’s this?” Ranpo looked back and forth between the business card on the table and Fukuzawa.

“It’s my contact information. I somehow ended up becoming something like a bodyguard after helping out a few people whose lives were in danger. Get in touch with me if you’re ever in serious trouble. First job’s on me,” Fukuzawa said while inwardly sighing at himself.

*I’m too soft. Even though I try so hard to avoid getting involved with others, I can’t stop myself from doing things like this. I want to be alone, but I can’t even kick a troubled boy to the curb. It’s true that I do owe him, but...*

Ranpo quietly accepted the business card. Then, after bringing it close to his face and giving it a hard stare, he muttered “Hmm” to himself before heading toward the back of the café. He put some change into the pay phone, then began to dial the rotary. Fukuzawa heard something ring in his pocket—his work phone. He always carried it with him in case there was an emergency job offer. Fukuzawa had a bad feeling about this, but he placed the phone to his ear anyway.

*“Please help me, Mr. Bodyguard, sir. I don’t have a job, and I’ve got no place to stay tonight. I’m going to die.”*

Fukuzawa listened to Ranpo’s monotone through the receiver. He could also hear him from the other side of the café.

“.....”

*“I’ll die?”* Ranpo repeated.



*Why did he make that sound like a question?*

“...Very well. I know a hotel that—”

*“I don’t have a job, and I’m going to die.”*

Ranpo cut Fukuzawa off midsentence. He held the pay phone with his back turned to Fukuzawa, making sure to avoid any eye contact.

Saying Fukuzawa was reluctant would have been an understatement. He imagined himself being swallowed by inescapable quicksand.

There was no work for a boy in the bodyguard profession. No need for clerical work or assistants, either. More importantly, what would anyone use this uncontrollable kid for even if they did hire him?

There was silence on the other side of the line. He was waiting for an answer. Perhaps someone other than Fukuzawa would have been able to come up with a sort of compromise. However, Fukuzawa didn’t want a boss or coworker. He didn’t trust organizations or other people. Even if that weren’t the case, talking to this kid tired him like nothing else. The best thing he could do for himself would be to rush out of the café and forget all about it.

“Then...come with me on my next job,” Fukuzawa said into the speaker. “I can’t help you, but my client was looking to hire someone. I’ll mediate. How does that sound?”

“Really?!”

Ranpo’s eyes lit up as he turned around. He looked at Fukuzawa and grinned ear to ear, receiver still in hand. Fukuzawa let out a brief sigh.

Neither a feeling of indebtedness nor an interest in Ranpo’s talents had anything to do with this. He was a stranger, after all. Fukuzawa just couldn’t ignore someone drowning in solitude before his very eyes. Ranpo was all alone. After losing his parents, he was thrown into a confusing world to wander without a path. He had no one to turn to and nowhere to go. He was merely surviving, existing.

Fukuzawa chose solitude, but this kid didn’t even get that luxury. Besides, there was no way Fukuzawa could reject him now after seeing him this ecstatic.

“Great! Now that that’s settled, let’s get a move on! First, I’ll just get my stu— Wait. First, I’ll wash my hands and— Wait, wait, wait. Before that, I wanna eat something a little salty! The inside of my mouth is so sweet that I can’t take it anymore! Hold this for me! I’m gonna go to the fried snack shop next door and get something to eat. Oh, hey! Actually, how about you go grab me something instead? Ugh, I’m so thirsty! Get me some tea, would ya, old guy?”

Ranpo was full of smiles.

A thought crossed Fukuzawa’s mind:

*Maybe I ought to just toss him into the ocean.*



*Three times*, Fukuzawa told Ranpo to quiet down as he whined for candy.

*Twice*, Ranpo wore down Fukuzawa's patience until he caved.

*Three times*, Ranpo asked Fukuzawa why planes could fly.

*Four times*, Fukuzawa convinced Ranpo to keep walking when he complained his legs were tired.

*Four times*, Fukuzawa carried Ranpo on his back.

The two of them finally arrived at their next destination, but Ranpo endlessly rambled, asked for opinions, and complained all along the way: "I hate walking. I'm not built for physical labor. Traveling's such a waste of time. What's the point of phones if we're not going to use them? Are we still not there yet? I want some more candy. This brand has been garbage recently. Their products got worse after they changed CEOs. Cities are awful, but the countryside is worse. I wanna go on a sightseeing cruise. I wanna feed the birds. Are we seriously not there yet? I want more candy. How are we not there yet? I want more candy. Are you sure we're not taking the long way?"

Fukuzawa didn't even bat an eye. A child's irritating ramblings were nowhere near enough to break the mental concentration of a man who had trained his spirit and technique through mastering ancient Japanese martial arts. His daily training had paid off; he was able to deal with Ranpo the entire time without letting anything show up on his face.

Nevertheless, while he was responding with nods and brief interjections, he had mentally already tossed Ranpo to the curb. He tied up Ranpo, left him on the street corner, and went home...in his head. He removed a manhole cover, tricked Ranpo to fall into it, and *splash!* After hearing Ranpo fall to his demise, he closed the manhole cover and left...in his head. Fukuzawa quietly came up with fifty ways to get rid of Ranpo and go home, but all the events solely took place in his mind. The more ideas Fukuzawa came up with, the more expressionless his face became, thus saving him from ever losing his temper and yelling. Ranpo even expressed admiration in the end. After idly gazing at Fukuzawa's expression, he said:

"You're one patient old guy."

It was a moment of great danger. If Fukuzawa's concentration had wavered in even the slightest, Ranpo would have a manhole over his head by now. Fukuzawa's daily training in the martial arts really was coming in handy. After traveling for two hours, Fukuzawa had finally come up with his fifty-first idea...but it was something far too wicked

to ever repeat. Soon after, they eventually reach their destination.

“A theater?”

“Yes.”

The deep-blue evening sky hung over them as they stood before the rectangular theater building. The current play’s poster was plastered on the bulletin board at the entrance. A few patrons could already be seen inside, despite there being quite a bit of time left before the show started. There was a stone monument installed in the wall with the words THEATRUM MUNDI carved into it.

Ranpo frowned melodramatically. “This looks so boring.”

“The owner here is short on staff. If all goes well, then we can probably get you a job.”

“What did the client hire you for anyway?”

“A death threat.”

Fukuzawa began to walk toward the entrance. Ranpo soon jogged after him.

After going through the service entrance in the back, Fukuzawa walked down the staircase to the basement, where the theater owner greeted him.

“So?” the owner demanded casually. “What’s your excuse for being late?”

The owner was a woman in a suit, probably around Fukuzawa’s age. With her chest held out and her arms crossed before her hips, she looked up at Fukuzawa with a defiant gaze. She seemed to have a tic where she would push up her glasses every few moments or so. Her wiry black-framed glasses were shaped like acute triangles.

“My apologies, Ms. Egawa.”

Fukuzawa bowed his head before the woman. It was Ranpo’s fault they were late due to his whining and grumbling, but that had nothing to do with this lady.

“*Sigh.* It’s fine.”

The owner swiftly turned around, then began walking down the hallway, her shoes click-clacking. Fukuzawa silently followed.

“There’s still time before the performance, so make sure to have a good look at the scene of the crime.”

While following Ms. Egawa, Fukuzawa asked, “Do you have any idea who made the death threat yet?”

Ms. Egawa stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“That isn’t your job. I’ve already alerted the police. Your job as bodyguard is to capture the culprit if anyone gets killed. In other words, you’re nothing more than security. The officers in uniform will be keeping watch and investigating. Gah, I can’t stand this. Someone sent us a death threat, and guess how many cops were sent over?”

Four. Just four. Ugh. I'm getting upset just thinking about it. They probably think this is a big joke; they seem so certain no one will get killed. If someone does end up murdered, then they'll know the blood's on their hands, mark my words."

Fukuzawa didn't even bat an eye, despite his confusion. The client who had introduced him to the theater said the owner was levelheaded and reliable in her work, but she seemed slightly different from what he had imagined. But that wasn't a problem for Fukuzawa. He had no interest in commenting on how others did their jobs. He simply needed to do his job, just like the owner said.

"Could you tell me about the threat? Depending on what the enemy is after, that could change how I approach things."

"Take a look at this."

Ms. Egawa took out a printed sheet of paper. A few lines were written in a simple typographical style.

"Someone sent this to my office a few days ago. 'An angel shall bring death, in the truest sense of the word, to the performer. —V.' They wrote the date and time of the performance along with its title. 'Angels'? 'V'? This death threat is ridiculous. I'll bet it's one of the rival theaters trying to hurt the business."

"You think so?"

A voice suddenly came out of nowhere, making Ms. Egawa jump.

"I happen to think it's pretty well done. One of the actors is going to be killed? Personally, I can't wait to see how this turns out, but I guess nothing really fazes you once you're old. You've probably seen it all by now."

"O-old'...?!" Ms. Egawa's eyebrows scrunched together. "Fukuzawa, who is this child? This is no time to be bringing along uninvited guests."

"My apologies. He's...looking for a job. I heard from your people that you were short on staff, so I thought maybe you could give him an interview when this was all taken care of."

"Well, we do need more workers year-round, but..." She narrowed her eyes and stared at Ranpo dubiously. "All right. Please send your résumé to the office in accordance with the rules, and we will examine it along with the other candidates."

"Whaaat? There are other people who want to work here?" Ranpo seemed to be in a bad mood. "That's not fair. There's no way I'm going to be hired if you do that! Make up your mind now."

"Excuse me?"

Fukuzawa sighed deep down inside his throat so that nobody else could hear.

*I...had a feeling this was going to happen.*

"Listen here, kid. Do you really think grown-ups want to hire a

brat? Good manners are a must in the adult world, so you'd do best to keep that in mind," said Ms. Egawa.

"Yeah, I've heard that one already." Around that moment, Ranpo began looking unprecedentedly annoyed. "The 'adult world' makes absolutely no sense to me. Why can't we just say how we really feel instead of hiding it? Take you for example. You don't want to be a theater owner. You may have spent a lot of money on your clothes and shoes to intimidate the workers, but you barely take care of your nails, and you don't wear any rings. Plus, you have calluses on your palms, although they're fading. Your hands want to return to their former job. In addition, you don't trust the police, your bodyguard, or anyone who works at the theater. If you did, you would've introduced this old guy here to the cops. But you didn't because you want him to keep an eye on them for you, right? And vice versa. I mean, I don't blame you, since someone's life is at risk here, but why not just come clean from the get-go?"

"Wha—?" She reflexively hid her hands. "Nonsense. What a rude child."

Her flustered expression made it clear to Fukuzawa as well. Ranpo must have hit the nail on the head.

"Want me to go on? The simple necklace you're wearing is brand-new, but it wasn't a gift. You bought it yourself. Also, you once pierced your ears, but the holes have started to close, showing me that it's been a few years since you've had a relationship with—"

"That's enough," interrupted Fukuzawa in a hushed tone. "Ms. Egawa, how you really feel is of no importance to me. All I plan on doing is making sure nobody dies tonight. At any rate, would you mind if I asked some of your workers some questions?"

"Whatever. Just do your job!" barked Ms. Egawa, trying not to sound flustered. "I like what I do! Ugh! I've had enough of this. I seriously just can't catch a break..."

She stomped off, quickly clicking her heels down the entrance hall as she left.

"The adult world is so bizarre. What made her so mad?" Ranpo muttered as he watched her walk away.

Fukuzawa took in a deep breath, paused, then exhaled. His expression was exhaustion itself. It was the face of someone who had found out why Ranpo couldn't hold a job.



The details of what the performers would be doing during the show had to be investigated. If the death threats were aimed at the performers, then they had to nail down a few things. Where were they

going to be and at what time? Would there be any moments when they would be alone? Apparently, the police were mainly keeping their eyes on the entrances and exits, and there weren't enough of them to guard each performer individually. In other words, once the criminal got inside the venue, they would be free to do whatever they'd like.

Therefore, Fukuzawa and Ranpo went around talking to each performer. They were handed the time schedule the performers all got, along with a program that had all of their roles and appearances listed. Nevertheless, Fukuzawa felt he had to check what exactly each performer would be doing and when they would be vulnerable. He needed to remind them to not do anything alone. If given the chance, Fukuzawa also wanted to ask the performers if they had any idea why the criminal sent them a death threat.

The first person Fukuzawa went to was the star of the show—a young man, from a group of twelve performers, who would be playing the protagonist. He was sitting in his private dressing room while religiously reading over his lines.

“Uh? Excuse you.” The handsome young man lifted up his head from the script and frowned. “What do you want? It's almost showtime, and I'm reading over my script.”

There was no one else in the room. Perched on the edge of his seat, the young man angrily threw the script to the side.

“The show is about to begin. Do you have any idea how it feels to be an actor right before a performance?”

Fukuzawa didn't respond.

“We dive into another world—become other people. And we practice nearly a year for this moment. If you get in my way, you're dead.” The performer then threw back his glass of water that was sitting on the table. “I'm thirsty. Fetch me some water, will you?” The young man signaled to the large container of water with his chin as he held out his empty glass to Fukuzawa. He drank the glass of water that Fukuzawa quietly poured for him, then said, “I'm concentrating.”

After a close look, the young man appeared to be somewhat pale. Slightly dark bags hung under his nervous-looking eyes as well.

“I respect your work,” said Fukuzawa while he stared at his pale expression, “but there's a chance you performers could die tonight. Is there any part during the play when you're alone?”

The star, Murakami, took in a deep breath to say something, but he immediately exhaled as if he had given up.

“...I'll be alone in the wings a few times. There will be some stagehands backstage, so I won't be by myself when I go to the dressing room. I'll also be alone right before curtain call. Anyway, we're all doing our best to be careful, so I'll make sure I'm with

someone at all times... Oh, but we'll be pretty vulnerable in one particular place, especially me. I'll be alone for ten, twenty minutes at a time."

"And where is that?"

"On the stage." The corner of Murakami's lips curled into a grin. "I am the star of the show, after all."

Fukuzawa groaned. He wouldn't be able to guard the performers onstage with them, and it wasn't as if he could order them to perform in the shadows because they might be attacked. However, the stage was going to have everyone's eyes and ears. It would be nearly impossible for someone to assassinate a performer onstage and escape with that many people watching. The most dangerous time was surely when the actors were going to be alone.

"Heh. The leading actor, huh?" Ranpo, who was standing by Fukuzawa's side, suddenly spoke up.

"What'd you say? ...Oh, it's just some kid," said Murakami with a scowl. "Don't tell me you're that bodyguard's helper or something."

"Hey, what's the play going to be about?" asked Ranpo, completely ignoring Murakami.

"What kind of question is that? If you're one of the guards, then you should have gotten a script from the troupe. Read it yourself."

"And die of boredom? I couldn't even make it past the first page. Come on, just tell me."

*"Die of boredom"...?*

Fukuzawa quietly covered his face. Bringing Ranpo with him was a mistake. He'd thought that leaving Ranpo in the lobby was a disaster waiting to happen, but this wasn't any better. He said all the wrong things. Surely the actor was going to blow his lid and stop talking to them entirely... At least, that was what Fukuzawa thought.

"It's boring, huh? Well, if a brat like you says so, then it's gotta be," answered Murakami with a solemn expression. "The viewers are the ones who decide whether a play is boring. It'd be easy to strangle you until you agreed to read the entire script, but that's a job for a thug, not an actor. Hey, brat. What would make the play interesting to you?"

"To me? Hmm..." Ranpo tilted his head to the side. "It'd be pretty neat if one of the actors got killed during the performance just like the death threat said."

A chill ran down Fukuzawa's spine.

"Ha! An appropriately bratty answer." But Murakami cheerfully smirked. "If that's what the people want, then maybe giving it to them wouldn't be such a bad idea."

"Hold on," Fukuzawa interrupted, knitting his brows. He found the comment to be in bad taste.

“Obviously, I don’t plan on dying.” Murakami faced Fukuzawa. “But as someone in show business, you think about these things. ‘Would you take a life in order to achieve the ultimate performance?’ ...I would. Without a doubt. The only reason I haven’t is because nobody has come up to me and offered to teach me the secret of acting in return for someone’s life...yet. So my hat’s off to whoever made that death threat if they planned all of this only to surprise the viewers.”

Murakami wasn’t looking at Fukuzawa, nor was he looking at Ranpo. He was lost in his head—looking at himself and the spectators he could influence. Fukuzawa frowned. The spirit of a performer was an admirable thing, but this was troubling. Murder was being viewed as just something that happened; human life was nothing more than a bargaining chip. Why were the owner and this young man not taking this death threat seriously? Fukuzawa didn’t even think they should have been holding this performance in the first place. Surely rescheduling the show to save a life would be a no-brainer. And yet, the show was to go on. There were probably a lot of people who thought like Murakami.

“Well, people should be filling the seats right about now.” He stood out of his chair. “I ought to get going. We’re both professionals here, yes? And a professional protects their client and makes sure nobody gets harmed. I’m counting on you.”

There was no way to reply to a statement like that other than simply “Very well.”



After that, Fukuzawa met with the other performers and asked the same questions. There was a total of twelve actors who were going to be in the show: seven women and five men including the lead, Murakami.

Given the theater’s large size, it seemed fair to assume that each actor would have their own dressing room, but apparently, Murakami was the exception. The others had all gathered in one big dressing room where they checked their costumes, practiced their lines, and swung around small props like swords. Fukuzawa heard that Murakami was going to have around half the stage time to himself.

“He’s actually a really popular actor,” commented an actress. “This is basically a one-man show. He’s got way more lines than the rest of us, and he even has a fight scene,” she claimed as she checked her makeup. “He had a lot of meetings alone with Kurahashi, the playwright. He seems to have really put a lot of stock in it. I even heard that someone saw him yelling at the stage carpenter.”



Fukuzawa asked another actor about the events.

"Nobody actually believes someone is really going to get murdered," answered a slightly older actor while he looked at the program. "We work in entertainment, after all. Jealousy is far from unheard of. There are even fanatics who worship the troupe. We don't have time to worry about every single threat. Granted, I only have a side part, so there would be no value in killing me. If anyone in the cast is gonna get death threats, it's Murakami. He has a ton of groupies, followers, that sort of thing."

The actor smiled, but another actress knitted her eyebrows.

"A threat?" She wore a large silver wig and was fixing her makeup. "Honestly, I'm sure *everyone* knows where the death threat came from."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know..." The actress winked. "It's a small industry, yeah? People get together... They break up... Maybe someone banged one of the new girls, or they broke up and she quit. Who doesn't have one or two people on their hit list?"

"Do you?" Fukuzawa asked her, but she just giggled and evaded the question.

Hopefully, this was nothing more than a crime of passion, and the threat was just made to scare someone. Fukuzawa thought back to the assassin killing the secretary this morning.

What if the one who made the death threat was an assassin of that caliber? Fukuzawa wasn't confident he could protect everyone: the spectators, the performers, Ranpo, and himself.

He retired from the dressing room after hearing what everyone had to say. As he walked down the hallway, he thought.

*I could handle fighting one-on-one even if the assassin were a skill user, but no matter how skilled the bodyguard, there are only so many people that can be protected at once.*

If Fukuzawa were the assassin, then four police officers wouldn't change anything. He could break through, take advantage of the commotion, and kill the target with no problem at all. But Fukuzawa was there to protect, and if he wanted to create a safe space with an ironclad defense for everyone in the theater, he was going to need ten men. This was an obstacle Fukuzawa naturally encountered as a bodyguard. No matter how talented of a martial artist he was, the enemy would break through the holes in the defense. He was only one man. He couldn't protect the lives of every good person with just one body. Evil, on the other hand, would need only one body to pick a place, find an opening, and attack. All they would need was enough power and one moment to unleash it at maximum efficiency.

There was an imbalance between the power needed to protect and

the power needed to attack. The only way to protect oneself from incredible skill and power was to have skill and power of your own, but unfortunately, the scales strongly favored one side. Therefore, something other than brute force was needed to make up for it.

“Whatcha thinking about, old guy? I’m getting hungry, just to let you know.” The boy by Fukuzawa’s side suddenly spoke up in a lackadaisical tone.

Just then, Fukuzawa was hit with an epiphany.

Who was it who found the company president’s real killer this morning? Who was it who uncovered Ms. Egawa’s secrets during their first encounter?

“Hey, kid. Has anything jumped out at you since you’ve been here?”

There was no denying this boy had something extraordinary. Fukuzawa wasn’t sure exactly what, but perhaps it was something that could compensate for the difference in necessary force between attacking and defending.

Ranpo simply stared at Fukuzawa, eyes fixated on him. He could see something.

*What’s he looking at?*

“Nothing’s really stood out to me. It’s just confusing. That’s all.” Ranpo tilted his head in a bored manner.

Fukuzawa stopped in his tracks. He was standing in the theater’s entrance lobby. There was a long line with people already entering the building for the show.

“I see.” Fukuzawa sighed. Nothing had caught his attention?

Fukuzawa had been inadvertently depending on Ranpo for an answer. Looking back, that was probably why he brought him along to talk to the performers, despite knowing the negative consequences. Perhaps he’d even brought Ranpo to the theater just to witness his talents. It was a rather pathetic thing to do for someone who was initiated in the Sankyo school of ancient Japanese martial arts.

“Sigh... Nothing matters anymore. Looks like I lost my chance at getting a job here. Plus, it’s not like I could work somewhere you have to be punctual, too. That’s boring.” Ranpo idly kicked at the lobby’s floor, but a long-haired mahogany rug covered the area close to the entrance where they were, so it didn’t make much of a sound. “Besides, someone’s about to die, so this theater’s gonna go out of business.”

A few passersby looked back, startled, and a chill ran down Fukuzawa’s spine. It was far too dark for a child’s joke. An adult should have reprimanded him, but Fukuzawa didn’t even move a muscle. It wasn’t Ranpo’s bad manners that unnerved Fukuzawa.

*“After all, you’re the one who killed her, Mr. Secretary.”*

Ranpo's tone was exactly the same as it was then. Fukuzawa looked at Ranpo. He behaved as if nothing were out of the ordinary as he curiously looked back at Fukuzawa.

"Am I wrong?"

"...Nobody is going to die," Fukuzawa finally replied. "That's why I'm here. Neither the police nor the performers believe this threat is real. The reason why someone threatened the troupe wasn't important."

"It *isn't* a threat." Ranpo wore a displeased expression. "It was an announcement. A threat is when you say, 'Stop doing *this*, or I'll do *that*,' right? You get two choices with threats. But this just said they were going to kill the performers. This was an announcement—a declaration, even. That's why the criminal is going to be here and kill someone. They aren't seeking anything from the troupe because all they want is for their target to die."

Fukuzawa groaned.

Ranpo was completely right. The criminal's objective was extremely ambiguous. Any ordinary threat would have clarified the criminal's principles. *Stop the play. Apologize.* There would have been some sort of demand. But the threat this time, what Ranpo referred to as a declaration, didn't have that.

*"An angel shall bring death, in the truest sense of the word, to the performer. —V."*

"Why didn't you say anything before?" asked Fukuzawa.

"What good would that have done?" Ranpo replied as if he was offended. "You're all adults. Do something about it yourself. What good is asking a kid what he thinks is going to happen? Besides, everyone gets mad when I state the truth."

Was he talking about everything that had happened to him since he came to Yokohama? There was darkness in his eyes.

"Seriously, adults don't make any sense to me." Pouting, Ranpo started kicking the rug he was standing on with the ball of his foot. "If a kid like me was able to figure it out, then surely you and the police already noticed a long time ago, right? My mother never got tired of telling me, 'You're still just a kid.' And I agree with her. I really don't understand what adults are thinking. Sometimes I even doubt they know anything, but that's not even possible."

*"You're still just a kid." Of course you don't understand adults. Because adults are smarter than you.*

*Is that what she meant? It's not hard to understand why Ranpo's parents drilled that into his head, at least to a certain degree, and yet...*

"So you think adults also pick up on things you notice?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"

Fukuzawa's head was spinning.

It was then he realized he was facing something bigger than ever before. He was overwhelmed by the sheer size.

This kid didn't know anything. *He had no idea that most people have no idea what's going on.*

He was like this ever since they first met. He accused the secretary of murder and saw right through Ms. Egawa. Even now, his eyes saw far more than any adult, Fukuzawa included. However, Ranpo still hadn't realized that what he saw was only visible to him and him alone. He was still immature in that sense.

Only after growing do people learn that others are different—that people may be looking at the same things but perceive them differently. In fact, even some people well into their adulthood often forget that. They assume everyone thinks the same as they do, which often leads to conflict. That was what it meant to be human. Ranpo, still naive, may have fallen into that trap, but he did not deserve to be blamed. Nevertheless, Ranpo was an extreme case. Although he possessed such extraordinary powers of observation, he didn't think he was special.

Why? Was it his parents' fault? Was it because he lived a sheltered life with parents who had minds that rivaled his?

Fukuzawa could no longer ignore that itchy feeling. It was curiosity. He wanted to know just how talented this kid was.

"Hey, kid. What do you know about me?"

"Huh?" Ranpo made a strange face. "What do you mean? We just met, old guy. I don't know a thing about you."

"Anything's fine," assured Fukuzawa. "Just tell me what you know or what you noticed. If you exceed my expectations, I'll help you find your next job after this. How's that sound?"

"Uh...? Adults really like making deals, don't they?" Ranpo reluctantly nodded. "Fine. But seriously, we just met, so I'm gonna know way less about you than most people, okay?"

Ranpo was probably the only one who thought that.

"Just give it a try."

"Hmm..." Ranpo crossed his arms before continuing. "You're in your early thirties. A bodyguard. You're a master of the martial arts; after all, you threw down an assassin like it was nothing. You're single. You work alone. Right-handed. When you sat down at the café, you unconsciously made sure to sit with the wall to your right, so you used to practice swordsmanship as well. After all, if the wall was on the left side, you wouldn't be able to swiftly draw your sword if something happened. You sat where the entrance was visible, which shows me you've seen your fair share of carnage in your lifetime. The reason why you barely make any noise even while walking on the hard theater floors is that you've trained for street and indoor combat.

And the reason why you started to walk with one eye closed a little before we went through the unlit service entrance was so that you could immediately see your surroundings the moment you stepped into the darkness. In other words, you're trained for ambushes in dark places."

Fukuzawa could feel his body gradually get colder. He slowly lost the feeling in his toes. His throat dried and tensed up as his palms began to sweat.

"You have a good reputation as a bodyguard, but you haven't been in the business long. A bodyguard's job is to protect people, so you wouldn't need to sneak around in the dark without making a sound. You quit your previous job, but you weren't working in the shadows to kill people for money like that hit man from earlier. You made that clear when you didn't show any real emotion when you talked about assassins. Plus, you didn't seem to be on your guard when you talked to the police. That's why your previous job wasn't some sort of illicit, shadowy gig. But you don't use a sword anymore, despite it being your area of expertise, and that's because you did something you're ashamed of at your last job."

Fukuzawa felt an intense pain in his chest. His throat was so dry he could scarcely breathe. Everything was flickering red and black.

"But what kind of job where you use your sword to ambush people would be both lawful and shameful? Come to think of it, a few years ago there was a lot of dispute over the cease-fire agreement. Some war hawk bureaucrats were advocating for maintaining and expanding the front line. But one by one, they were found dead along with the leaders of the foreign military parties who backed them up. I noticed you grimaced at the newspaper stand when you saw the follow-up article on it, which makes me wonder—"

"Shut up!"

Fukuzawa exploded. As if his spirit were physically gushing into the room, the glass shook, the lights clicked, and a theater employee walking in the distance let out a slight yelp. Martial arts masters employed a similar phenomenon when they attacked with their chi. Being right next to him, Ranpo took the brunt of Fukuzawa's unconscious yet fiery attack. After being pushed back a few steps, Ranpo fell on his rear as he if had been hit with a large invisible mallet. He blinked, still sitting, with a perplexed expression. The master class-level chi energy attack had knocked him unconscious for a second. Fukuzawa suddenly returned to his senses, albeit startled.

"Sorry... You all right?" He approached Ranpo and helped him up.

"Buh...?"

Ranpo was still idly blinking. Fukuzawa was overcome with a

sense of shame. It was inexcusable for a martial arts master to use what could be considered condensed bloodlust on an ordinary person. It was evidence of just how disturbed Fukuzawa was. He never thought he would be this upset. It was something he had already come to terms with; it was a past he had already cut ties with. The only ones who knew the truth were his past comrades.

It wasn't an act of evil. The mayhem probably would have gone on without Fukuzawa's blade, thus leading to thousands of more victims. But it was a shady job that must never see the light of day. Everyone involved in Fukuzawa's work was a high-ranking government official, but he hadn't contacted them since then. Every one of them had kept their mouth shut about the incident, and Fukuzawa had planned to take this secret to the grave. And yet, a boy he had just met saw right through him—very easily at that.

"Don't...talk about that," Fukuzawa finally managed to say. "I get it now. You're the real thing."

No secrets were safe in Ranpo's presence, but he had no idea he was special, which was exactly why this wasn't the time to be getting worked up. There had to be a way to get Ranpo to recognize his abilities; Fukuzawa would need to think of something.

Just then, a bell rang over the intercom, signaling that the performance was to start in five minutes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the show is about to begin. Please come inside," said the worker in front of the door.

"Come on."

Fukuzawa grabbed Ranpo, whose eyes were still glazed over, and headed toward the door to the auditorium.

He would have Ranpo observe the stage. The boy might be able to figure something out that way.

Thoughts raced through Fukuzawa's jumbled mind. He still felt on edge. Having his secret known startled him, and he was taken aback by Ranpo's powers of observation. But was that it? It was as if something else lurked in the depths of Fukuzawa's uneasiness—something he was in no place to deal with right now.



The show started the moment Fukuzawa and Ranpo took their seats, front row center. The seats were too close to the stage, which made them far from fit for theatergoing. But Fukuzawa chose them because they were nearest to the stage in case he needed to rush over to protect a performer from an attack. Ranpo sat next to him. His legs were trembling while he idly stared off into space, as if he was still shaken up from earlier.

The theater seated roughly four hundred people. Looking around, almost all the seats were filled. The audience was a mix of ages and genders, but the biggest demographic by and large were women in their twenties.

As the chime sounded and the curtains rose, the show finally began. Fukuzawa had already read the script, so he knew what the play was about.

The death threat said, “An angel shall bring death, in the truest sense of the word, to the performer.” The use of the word *angel* was probably not a coincidence or joke. After all, this play was a story about an angel.

Fukuzawa thought back to the script. If the play were summarized in one phrase, it would be: *a story about an angel who murders*. It was a story in which each of the twelve characters are killed by the angel one after another.

The characters killed in the story have no idea they are being massacred by an angel because there is nothing unique about the ways they are murdered: stabbed with a knife, a fatal fall, strangulation, poison. Furthermore, nobody ever sees any of the murders take place; they simply die one by one. Therefore, the characters have no idea if they are being supernaturally judged by an angel or murdered by a serial killer.

One of the characters posed an idea. “If it was an angel, they would use the divine blade in their hand. There would be no reason for them to wait until someone is alone to kill them in some physical manner.” That’s why he claims that one of the twelve characters is a serial killer who is making it seem like the killer is an angel.

Another character said: “If this was the work of man, then that would mean the killer was one of us. But that’s impossible. There is no reason for us to kill one another. The angel would have a motive, though. We are sinners who disobeyed the angel, and it is an angel’s job to purge those who have done evil. To look at it from another perspective, all twelve of us are the same. We have all sinned, and we are connected through our fear of the angel. What would killing a fellow runaway help?”

The protagonist, Murakami, was like a leader who kept them together. Standing on the stage, Murakami yelled out, “O Lord, we have sinned. You have clipped us of our wings and left us on this planet to punish us. Wasn’t that enough to atone? Why must we suffer such cruelty?”

The twelve sinners were also angels in the past. They admired humans and sought to coexist with them, which enraged God so much that he stripped them of their powers and banished them to earth as humans. The play was titled *The Living World Is a Dream, the Nocturnal*

*Dream Is Reality.* The plot involved former angels banished from the celestial world and rendered mortal who gathered at an old theater to earn God's forgiveness.

During all of this, the twelve characters were killed one after another, so they tried to uncover whether it was an angel killing them or one of their fellow men. In a sense, it was a mystery story as well. Between the mystery parts, it focused on the relationships among the characters, their love, and their hatred. The former angels worked together as lovers, siblings, and enemies, but at the same time, they doubted one another. They wandered the old theater, wondering if their brethren could be the killer. Their goal was to find a certain skill user who lived there.

"What's a skill user?" Ranpo suddenly asked.

Fukuzawa hesitated for a moment, but not because he didn't know how to explain that skill users weren't very well-known to the public. It was the middle of the performance—they'd stick out like a sore thumb if they started talking in the first row.

"You'll see" was the only thing he ended up saying.

What was unique about this play was that it mentioned the existence of skill users. Revealing their existence wasn't prohibited, but there was a darkness that surrounded it. Due to the war, the number of skill users legally working decreased, and most of them either disappeared from public eye or started working for an underground organization. In addition, there was a government agency managing domestic skill users, so broadcasting the existence of skill users could become a problem. Not many people knew of their existence outside of rumors and fairy tales; thus, a play that included one of them was an anomaly. Due to these circumstances, the skill user was depicted in good taste but as total fiction.

*One skill per person.*

*Some could freely use their skill, while others were uncontrollable and happened automatically.*

*While some people were born with skills, others suddenly developed theirs.*

*Skills do not always make the possessor happy.*

The characters in the play were searching for a skill user who fit these rules. One after another, their fellows disappeared. They grew suspicious of one another, but they continued wandering the theater in search of that one ray of hope, for that one skill user was the only one who could forgive them of their sins.

During the play, it was explained that skill users were former angels who were once kicked out of the celestial world but allowed to return. They would get back a small portion of their unlimited powers and be allowed to stand before God again. They were new angels who



finished atoning for their sins—skill users.

Fukuzawa couldn't help but think about this creative interpretation. He had encountered countless skill users due to the nature of his work. The assassin who killed the secretary was most likely one as well. There would be no way he could have made that shot with his arms tied behind his back and a sack on his head otherwise.

If he was an angel who was atoning for his sins, then the heavens were going to be chaos. Regardless, it was clear that the person who wrote the script knew about skill users and probably had hoped to accomplish something by making it into a play.

Was that somehow related to the death threat?

A murderer who referred to themselves as V...

A play about the search for a skill user...

Fukuzawa's gaze wandered among the crowd. Not a single soul opened their mouth as their eyes were glued to the stage. They forgot to make expressions. They even forgot who they were as they gazed intently at the play. The power of performance was making the audience forget they were there—taking them somewhere far away. The audience had come all the way here and paid for the event. They knew it would happen; that was why they came. Everyone let the drama, the eccentric script, and the breathtaking acting, especially Murakami's, take them away as they temporarily left their bodies behind.

But Fukuzawa couldn't allow himself to do that. Leaving his body behind now would lead to trouble. He focused his attention and stared at the crowd.

Surely the enemy wasn't shamelessly sitting there with the audience, but acting like a customer to sneak in was common. Fukuzawa casually looked behind himself as he sat in the front, searching for someone acting suspicious or getting out of their chair for no good reason during the act.

Straining his eyes in the darkness, he saw someone every now and then who wasn't necessarily suspicious, but who didn't seem to be very enthusiastic. A mother and her child. A young couple. An old man scowling. A middle-aged woman dozing off, having succumbed to her fatigue. A man wearing an overcoat who seemed to be focusing on the theater itself rather than the actors on stage.

The last man in the suit slightly caught Fukuzawa's attention. There was nothing about his appearance that really stood out. He was your run-of-the-mill kind of guy. He wore a navy suit with a broad-brimmed bowler hat and held a T-shaped cane in one hand. He was reminiscent of the typical Western gentleman. It wasn't clear what about him bothered Fukuzawa, exactly, but there were a few things

that made him suspicious. He was sitting in the front row, he sat up completely straight and didn't fidget in the least, and his overcoat was slightly large for his overly skinny appearance.

Upon closer inspection, the man had a piercing gaze contrary to his gentlemanlike appearance, almost as if he were looking inside the actors. They were the eyes of a predator, like a hawk or leopard moments before pouncing on its prey. One thing was for sure; they were not the eyes of someone enjoying the play. Was the large overcoat being used to hide a weapon? Was the cane in his hand a sword cane? Fukuzawa would be able to stop him from this position if the man were to commence a surprise attack, but...

Fukuzawa quietly measured the distance with his gaze. He played out every move the enemy could make in his mind and calculated. That was when...

"Hey, can I ask you something?" asked Ranpo suddenly. "Everyone here paid money to see this, right?"

"No talking during the show," scolded Fukuzawa. However...

"Why would anyone pay to watch a story this predictable?" asked Ranpo. He looked incredulous, as if he couldn't believe what was happening.

Fukuzawa had a bad feeling about this.

"I mean, even the twist is so predictable! That's the murderer! Even a child wouldn't need more than five minutes to figure it out!"

The people sitting on both sides of Fukuzawa and Ranpo began to mutter to themselves in annoyance, but Ranpo paid no heed.

"The reason he got to be with the protagonist at the time of the first murder was because he used a candle as a time delay for the trigger! There were only two candles! You saw it with your own eyes, right, old guy?"

A small commotion began to grow around Ranpo. The actor onstage was glancing at him as well.

"Ugh! You're so stupid! That guy you're turning to for help is the killer! You still have the first picture you took, right? You'd be able to see he's the killer if you just looked at it! Why are you dawdling?"

A few audience members began to whisper.

"What's wrong with that boy?"

"But... Wait. That's the killer? No way."

"It would all make sense if he is, though, right?"

"Stop," Fukuzawa lightly chided Ranpo.

But Ranpo continued.

"Oh, great. Just great. The two who went to the cargo room are gonna be killed next because they just happened to see the spider's web that could have been used as evidence. Now just watch. The killer's going to make up some excuse to leave the room like he needs

to get the map or something. Ugh! Don't let him get away!"

Ranpo stomped his feet on the ground in an aggravated manner. Almost immediately...

"I'll go get the map," said the character onstage as he disappeared behind the wing curtain.

"See?! This is so aggravating!"

The commotion started to get louder.

"No way. That's the killer?"

"B-but he's such a good guy... Why?"

"Was everything he said to his girlfriend just a lie?"

The whispers began to spread from seat to seat. Fukuzawa's stomach pains were only getting worse.

"That's enough. Some things you just need to keep to yourself," demanded Fukuzawa with a little force.

"Why? Why is everyone watching this show? It's so aggravating!" Ranpo's eyes were ablaze with fury. "Seriously, why? It makes no sense to me. I don't understand anyone! Why are adults like this? Why is everyone like this? Someone, just tell me *why*!" he shouted.

This outburst didn't just come out of nowhere. Doubt and stress had been swelling inside him for the longest time, waiting to explode.

"I don't understand what anyone's thinking! I'm scared! It feels like I'm surrounded by monsters! It doesn't matter what I say—nobody understands me! My parents were the only ones who did, and they're dead!"

This time, he was screaming—an anguished lamentation aimed at nowhere in particular. The protagonist onstage was begging the skill user, who was nowhere to be found, to save them. As the protagonist cried for help, so did Ranpo.

"If there's a skill user here, save me! If there's an angel, then save me! Why must I be alone?! Why do I have to live alone in the middle of a bunch of monsters?"

"Enough!"

Fukuzawa grabbed on to Ranpo with both hands. Ranpo glared back at him with clear animosity in his eyes.

"I'll tell you why. I'll tell you what you want to know, so just stop."



“...”

Ranpo didn't say a word. Just then, the stage got dark, and lights began to shine one by one over the audience.

“We will now be having a fifteen-minute intermission. Part two will begin at six twenty.”

A broadcast sounded throughout the entire theater.

Fukuzawa thought back to the program. He'd almost forgotten there was going to be a break in the middle of the show.

Shadowy figures began standing and chatting.

“Come with me.”

Fukuzawa took Ranpo's hand, but Ranpo was in a foul mood and looked away without even budging.

“Now!”

After forcing Ranpo out of his seat, Fukuzawa dragged him out of the auditorium.



They walked over to a few square seats in the lobby away from the crowd. Ranpo was sitting, albeit sulking, while Fukuzawa was standing right in front of him. Ranpo was fidgeting with his sleeves, so upset he couldn't sit still. Fukuzawa watched him without saying a word. Before long, five minutes of unchanging silence had passed.

“Okay,” muttered Ranpo as if he couldn't take the silence any longer. “Get it over with. Give me your lecture. I've been chewed out like this by tons of people at my past jobs, so I know it's coming. I know what you're going to say, too.”

“You're surprisingly self-aware,” noted Fukuzawa, his voice low.

“I'm gonna be scolded because I did something wrong, right? If so, then it'd actually make me feel a little better. It's an easy concept to grasp.”

“...You're right.”

Fukuzawa pondered. He wasn't a person who could teach something to this kid. He had always avoided giving guidance to others his entire life. This was the first time he ever regretted that. Fukuzawa had to tell him something. This teenager was at the edge of the cliff, leaning forward.

“Tell me about your parents.” Fukuzawa made sure to select his words wisely. “Did they say anything about your gift?”

“My ‘gift’?” Ranpo furrowed his brow. “I wouldn't be having trouble finding a job right now if I had a gift.”

“Then... Did they say anything to you about your future?”

“Uh... My father always said, ‘One day, you're going to surpass

your mother and me, and you're going to win the admiration of all those around you. But now's not that time. Stay humble and keep your silence. Always be modest. Just quietly observe and don't hurt others with what you discover.' ...Or something like that. I don't really know what he meant, though."

*I figured.*

Fukuzawa quietly nodded.

So his father knew, after all. He understood that Ranpo possessed an extraordinary gift. He knew his son had the special ability to observe, remember, and uncover the truth in the blink of an eye. That was why he sealed it away. He didn't want Ranpo to go astray, to ever hurt others and make the world his enemy. His father wanted Ranpo to learn virtue and what's right just like any ordinary person until he had grown up with good judgment and knowledge.

He was protecting him, creating a transparent cocoon to protect his extraordinary gift from this strange world. Ranpo's parents raised him like an ordinary child. What an astounding deed that must have been. How difficult it must have been to convince him that the world he saw was normal and nothing he knew was anything other than common sense. But Ranpo's parents did that with their extraordinary minds. What was such a feat, if not unconditional love? But long before Ranpo had fully matured—far before Ranpo was ready for the world—they departed this life. An immature yet gifted larva was stripped of his cocoon and abandoned.

The palms of Fukuzawa's clenched fists began to sweat. No matter how strong his opponent was, he never experienced fear like this. The larva was without shelter. He was only moments away from being crushed by the outside world. If Fukuzawa didn't use just the right amount of force, then the damage would be irreparable. While hesitant, Fukuzawa finally spoke up.

"You...have a gift. A gift to observe and deduce. Nobody has ever figured out my past job. Nobody knew who really killed the president of that company other than you. You're special, Ranpo, and if you so desire, you will become a greater mind than even your parents."

"As if." Ranpo immediately shot down the claim. "My parents were amazing. There's no surpassing them to reach the top because they *were* the top. Neither of them ever told me once that I had a gift, and I believe them."

He was stubborn. The protective wall his parents created was thick. That wall protected Ranpo from a world of ordinary people who would fear and fail to understand him, yes, but it was also what rendered him unable to step into the outside world.

"During the play, you were able to guess who the killer was," Fukuzawa continued. "And at that point in the performance, you were

probably the only one in the audience who had. I myself didn't know until I finished the script."

"Huh?" Ranpo gave a distinctly inquiring look. "Don't lie to me. If I figured it out, surely an adult would have no problem."

The discussion was going in circles. He didn't understand others because he didn't think he was special. He didn't think he was special because he didn't understand others, which only confirmed what his parents had told him. It was unyielding logic that fed off each other, and the only way to break through was to shine light on something completely new.

Something different.

A new factor that Ranpo hadn't even thought of.

"Tell me this." Fukuzawa persevered. "Have you ever thought the people around you were stupid? That they were a bunch of fools who didn't understand a thing?"

"..."

Ranpo sent Fukuzawa a skeptical glance, and a few moments went by before he answered.

"...I have."

"That's it. Believe in that feeling. You have a gift, but everyone else is a fool, including me. The reason why you're all alone is because of your talents. Utilize them. There's nothing you can't do."

"Don't think you can control me with a few compliments." Ranpo slightly averted his gaze. "My mother told me to never look down on others. Besides, why would only I be special? There are so many people in the city, so why would I be the only special one?"

"That's because..."

*I'm almost there. I can't allow myself to mess up now.*

The time for decision was near. Fukuzawa wasn't an eloquent speaker. He wasn't someone who could manipulate others with his words. There was only one card left up his sleeve that he could play.

Sincerity.

"You were right," admitted Fukuzawa. "I used to carry a sword at my waist. From an early age, I trained at a government-run school of martial arts. I was one of the five greatest swordsmen in the government, known as Goken. I truly thought my sword was for the peace and welfare of the nation... And I killed for that belief."

Fukuzawa stared off into the distance. Ranpo carefully observed his expressions.

"Assassinations were extremely simple. I had an overwhelming advantage, and not even once had I ever struggled in battle. It started to frighten me when I noticed I was looking forward to my next mission. I no longer knew if I was killing for the country or killing for the enjoyment of it. That was when I decided to permanently lay

down my sword.”

Fukuzawa remained calm as he spoke.

*Why am I telling him this? Why am I telling this kid something I've never told anyone before?*

But the words continuously crawled out of the depths of his heart and poured out of his mouth.

“Power must be kept in check. Power that cannot be controlled must be discarded. If you refuse to acknowledge your gift, you are no different from the bloodthirsty man I used to be. You must recognize your talents, especially now that your parents are gone.”

Fukuzawa yearned to speak more eloquently. He didn't need the ability to fire up an entire crowd, or even the sort of inane flattery that could rouse the populace. All he wanted was to be able to tell a little white lie so that this kid could see the simple truth.

“I get what you're saying, but...” Ranpo scowled hard at Fukuzawa while remaining seated. “But—then tell me. What am I? What were my parents telling me? Make me understand why I'm here—why I'm like this. If you can do that, then I'll believe you.”

Ranpo was no longer sulking. Instead, he was honestly looking for an answer—something he'd never done before. And Fukuzawa was the only one who could give it to him.

“The intermission is about to end. Please return to your seats.”

The announcement played over the intercom. The few people around started to walk away and head back to their seats, and Ranpo was already looking toward the small crowd.

Fukuzawa didn't have much time. If he let this chance go by, Ranpo would probably never seek answers again.

“That's because...”

Fukuzawa paused midsentence.

Anything. Anything would do. He just needed to say something.

He had already used the ace up his sleeve: sincerity. He wasn't good at persuading others or speaking eloquently, either. He was even worse at lying. Just then...Fukuzawa suddenly caught sight of the script rolled up in Ranpo's hand. The troupe had given it to him, but he hadn't made it past the first paragraph before getting bored. As if by reflex, Fukuzawa said:

“Because you're a skill user.”

Ranpo seemed perplexed. “...What?”

“A skill user,” repeated Fukuzawa. Even he still wasn't exactly sure what he was saying. “The reason you're special is because you're a skill user. Your skill awakened when your parents died. That's... that's precisely it.”

“A skill user...? Why?”

Ranpo's eyes darted about in abject confusion. This was



essentially the first time Fukuzawa had experienced something like this in his life. More precisely—he had never spoken so impulsively.

“It’s all because of your skill. You can see the truth with nothing more than a simple glance. They spoke about it in the play, right? There are people in this world who possess supernatural abilities. And skills don’t always make the possessor happy. Yours is the reason why you’re in pain and why everyone seems like a monster.”

“...???” Ranpo was at a loss. He blinked in silent confusion.

“You have to control your skill.”

Fukuzawa gave thanks to his daily training. He had no idea what he was saying, but his heart was racing, and cold sweat dripped from his palms. Nevertheless, his expression was completely still. It was as if he were reading the newspaper just as he always did. Any hesitation in a fight with real swords could lead to death. The enemy must never get the chance to observe your eyes and predict your next move. That was why Fukuzawa was naturally able to keep a straight face, even if he was feeling anguished or terrified. Put simply, Fukuzawa was playing cool.

“You are a skill user, therefore you’re special. To prove that, I’ll teach you how to control that skill. You’ll be able to freely utilize it with the help of a *certain item*. And with that item, you will learn how to control this skill that brings you such pain.”

“...?? A ‘certain item’? Like what...?”

Leaning forward, Ranpo tilted his head to the side.

*I haven’t thought that far yet.*

Fukuzawa’s eyes wandered around the room in search of a hint.

*Anything will do. Is there nothing here? There has to be something that can make Ranpo focus. Something...*

His hand lightly brushed against his pocket.

*That’s it.*

“This.” Fukuzawa whipped something out of his pocket.

“What the...? Glasses?”

“It was a gift given to me by a well-known noble in Kyoto.”

*I lied. It was dead stock from the neighborhood general store.*

“When you wear these, your skill will be activated, and you will be able to immediately see the truth. On the other hand, when you’re not wearing them, you will no longer care about how foolish those around you are. Here, they’re yours.”

“...Okay...” Ranpo accepted the black-framed glasses as if he had no idea what was going on. “These look like ordinary cheap glasses to me...”

*He’s got that right.*

“Of course they would, since you didn’t even know that skills existed until earlier today.” Fukuzawa quietly took in a deep breath.

“Uh-huh... So do I put them on?”

Ranpo unfolded the temples, then lowered his head and started to put on the glasses when—

“*Haaah!*”

—Fukuzawa let out a battle cry, and Ranpo immediately lost consciousness. It was an energy blast, as before, but the scale and directionality were different this time. It was a chi attack normally used in life-and-death battles, but Fukuzawa had utilized it to knock Ranpo out. Even a highly trained martial artist’s head would go blank and lose control of their body in the face of such an attack, so a teenager like Ranpo stood no chance.

Ranpo was unconscious while still holding the glasses to his face. He collapsed into his chair, and the impact caused the glasses to completely latch around his ears.

“...Ah...”

A few seconds went by before he regained consciousness. Ranpo stared up at the ceiling, blinking.

“Behold. The world is a new place,” Fukuzawa said, welcoming him.

“Huh...? What just happened...? These are keeping my skill in check...? I don’t feel any different, though... Do I...? Do I not...? My head feels kind of funny...”

“The glasses have accepted you,” claimed Fukuzawa with a profound note in his voice.

He wore the expression of an enlightened being living atop a sacred mountain. Deep down, however, he was taken aback by just how outlandish his claim was.

“Use these to control your skill. From now on, you are skilled detective Ranpo Edogawa. Use your skill to uncover the truth. Destroy evil hidden in darkness. You can do that, for you are the greatest detective in the world.”

“I, uh... ‘G-greatest detective in the world’?”

“Yes. The greatest detective in the world,” repeated Fukuzawa as if he were imprinting that thought on a newly born chick’s mind. “Isn’t it all clear now? The world isn’t a frightening place. Everyone else isn’t a monster. They’re just stupider than you.”

Ranpo caught his breath. He traced his finger around the glasses’ frames as he pondered. “But... No, could it be...? So back then, and then, and that time... Everyone was just stupid? They just didn’t know any better?”

“Exactly. Listen, Ranpo. The world is full of fools. They don’t know how to look at things. They’re babies who can’t even hold up their own heads yet. Nobody bears any ill will toward you. Do you think babies hate others? Do you think they would try to confuse

someone to trick them?"

"...No," muttered Ranpo with his head hanging low. "So that one time... And that other time... All the pain I've suffered... But when you put it that way... I see..." Hunched over with a downcast gaze, Ranpo slightly lifted up his head. It was as if he were slowly breaking out of his cocoon. "I see... So that's why. Nobody hates me."

"Nobody hates you."

Ranpo suddenly hopped to his feet. His beaming smile stretched from ear to ear.

You could practically hear the light bulb go off in his head.

"Ha-ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It all makes sense! So everyone is just a big baby! Well, of course they are! The world isn't a disgusting place! Not at all! It's just a simple, stupid place!"

Ranpo laughed in glee. He stood up straight, virtually radiating with a powerful glow like the morning sun. His expression was brighter than Fukuzawa had ever seen before. Ranpo was overjoyed with his rebirth. Then he declared, "*Looks like I've gotta protect these stupid toddlers myself!*" Ranpo swiftly turned around and looked at Fukuzawa. "Go back to the theater without me, old guy! I've got something I need to do. I can probably still prevent the murder from happening!"

"...What?"

"The killer is going to do what he said he would! That much is crystal clear! So I'm gonna use that to my advantage! Now go! I need you right next to the stage!"

Ranpo steadily pushed Fukuzawa forward from behind. Fukuzawa had no idea what was going on. His stream-of-consciousness fib somehow got Ranpo to understand he was gifted a moment ago, but now it felt as if he was far past that.

What was going on? The killer was about to strike?

"Wait. But if we do that—"

"Trust me! Just go!"

Ranpo was pushing Fukuzawa even harder now. Losing the initiative, Fukuzawa was slowly pushed into the hall, unable to even fight back.

But...if the killer really was about to make a move, wouldn't it be dangerous to leave Ranpo alone?

Just then, the chime signaling the curtain's rise rang.

"I can already see it—the enemy's target, their plan! I can see it all! I'll be just fine. Go on ahead. *I want you to keep an eye on the audience!*"

Fukuzawa hesitated. It was wonderful that Ranpo was motivated, but if what he said was true, then that would mean there was a killer lurking in the theater. There was no way trying to thwart the enemy's

plan wouldn't be dangerous.

He looked at Ranpo's expression. It was strong; it was the face of someone who overcame. He'd overcome colossal walls and broken through the chains that shackled him. That would make this his first job as a new man. Fukuzawa had to trust him. To do anything else would be disrespectful.

"All right. Be careful," Fukuzawa said with a nod.

"I will!" exclaimed Ranpo, his voice projecting far and wide. "After all, I'm the one who protects the foolish! I'm the greatest detective in the world!"



Fukuzawa returned to the dark theater hall alone.

After doing something so out of character, he felt like his head was full of bricks. He wasn't the least bit confident what he had done was right. After all, Fukuzawa hadn't worked this hard to do something for another person these past few years. Maybe a few days from now, he would realize that he had actually made a grave mistake and that this lie had completely ruined Ranpo. Nothing could be said for sure just yet, though. Ranpo's smile, however, was radiant. All he could do was accept that as proof to justify what he had done.

Fukuzawa walked down the aisle while looking around. The play had already started, so everyone had their eyes glued to the stage. There was a white screen at the back of the stage that projected the background scenery. This performance used real furniture as props, such as desks and shelves, but the supplemental background was a video being projected onto a screen instead of the usual painting. It was probably to cut down on costs; the screen itself would sometimes warp like quicksand, playing a role in stage effects. Standing before the screen now was the lead, Murakami, who was facing the void alone for his performance.

It was a scene of sorrow as he pleaded to the void, apparently crying out to the angel who continued to slaughter them. If Ranpo was right, then someone was going to be murdered at some time during the play. Ranpo told Fukuzawa to stand as close to the stage as possible; if Fukuzawa was going to trust him, then that would be here. The stage was right before him.

Regardless, was the killer really going to shamelessly commit a crime in front of hundreds of people? How would they even do that? Everyone had their possessions checked at the entrance before the show, so it would have been impossible to sneak in a gun. Did they smuggle in a blowgun and darts? Even then, there was quite a distance to the stage. They would have to be as skilled as a ninja from

the Sengoku period to do that. Were they going to rush the stage and kill someone, then? That would work to Fukuzawa's benefit, since he could jump in and prevent it.

Whatever the case, this was a crucial moment. Something was about to happen here. Fukuzawa couldn't keep his eyes off the audience for even a second. He listened carefully, but not a single voice could be heard in the crowd. All he could hear were people adjusting themselves and clearing their throats. Obviously, the young man's voice onstage was the loudest.

"Forgive us, Warrior Angel of the Aureola! Otherwise, show yourself before us!" Murakami yelled out from center stage. His character was exhausted after wandering for years, so he was wearing a raggedy, grubby sack. Nonetheless, his eyes were ablaze at the invisible sorrow as if they were balls of life. "I am not afraid to die! If someone must be judged, then pierce my heart! Unsheathe the Heavenly Blade, which was once mine!"

Fukuzawa walked toward the audience seating while watching the performance. Murakami was good. It was clear why he said he would kill someone to master the art of performance; he excelled in his craft. He cried out as if his soul were broken; his eyes welled with emotion that seemed ready to overflow as tears of blood. There was a charm to his voice, and the silence between his lines was almost more effective than the lines themselves as he pleaded with the audience. There was not even a hint of the haughty man from the dressing room. His expression was different. His subtle habits were different. Perhaps nobody would even doubt it if someone said that was Murakami's twin brother. Murakami lifted his hands into the air.

"I know why you won't show yourself! You plan on killing everyone and leaving me here alone, yes? You wanted to show me the ugliness of man as my friends doubted and despised one another, yes? Then allow me to reveal your sin! I will find the key to the heavens and expose your sin of envy to—"

Murakami suddenly paused midsentence.

A blade was piercing his chest.

It was a white blade around the length of an arm, sticking out of his sternum. His costume was marred and torn open.

The blade withdrew. Fresh blood spewed from the wound as he grunted.

And just like that, he fell forward.

Nobody moved. Nobody could react. It didn't feel real. Everyone

believed that this was part of the play. Fukuzawa, on the other hand, could feel his brain turning numb and cold.

*This wasn't in the script.*

Fukuzawa rushed over almost immediately the moment Murakami fell. He sprinted to the stage and swiftly hurdled up the stairs, landing on the spotlighted center stage before running over to Murakami. The young man was lying facedown. The back of his costume was stained as the blood spread across the floor. Fukuzawa touched the blood and checked how it felt; he knew exactly how it was supposed to feel and smell. This wasn't theatrical blood. It was real.

Murakami was no longer breathing. His face was pale and slightly twitching. Fukuzawa checked his pulse, but it was faint. If the blade passed through his back from where he was hemorrhaging, then it would be safe to say it was a fatal wound.

But...

*Where was the weapon?*

"Call an ambulance!" Fukuzawa yelled out to a performer in the wing. "Tell the officers in the front to seal off the exits!"

The buzzing in the audience spread like wildfire.

What happened? What in the world happened to him?

Fukuzawa looked around. He had checked the stage front to back once already. There was no device that could have shot a blade. And yet, Murakami was impaled. Fukuzawa couldn't possibly have overlooked a blade even if it had appeared for only a moment. However, there was no weapon anywhere in sight.

It was as if he were stabbed by an *invisible angel*.

*"An angel shall bring death, in the truest sense of the word, to the performer."*

There was no weapon onstage. Fukuzawa checked underneath Murakami's body, but...nothing. Maybe above? Fukuzawa swiftly looked up. A row of white lights hanging above the stage was making it hard to see the catwalk, but he caught a glimpse of a metal boxlike object reflecting the light. Was it some kind of device? It was positioned right above Murakami. Did a blade drop from there?

However, the device almost immediately vanished into the darkness. Was someone up there? No, if anyone was there, Fukuzawa would have seen them regardless of how dark it was in the rafters. Then where was the killer? Suddenly, Fukuzawa thought back to what Ranpo had told him.

*"I want you to keep an eye on the audience!"*

Fukuzawa promptly looked back. On the stage, he had a clear view of the entire audience. Most of them looked as if they had no idea what was going on. Half of them simply stared vacantly, while

the other half scowled at Fukuzawa for disturbing the performance.

Was the killer among them?

“Nobody move!” roared Fukuzawa. “This isn’t part of the act! Do not get out of your chairs! Keep an eye on the person next to you! If anyone runs or hides, then inform me immediately!”

A stir abruptly rippled through the audience, and fear spread like ice.

“Is he with the police?”

“What is he talking about?”

“Wait... Is this...? But...”

It was a scream that changed everything.

“Nooo! Tokio!”

A woman came tumbling over from the wing with a maniacal shriek. It was a performer from the troupe—one of the women Fukuzawa and Ranpo had talked with. She rushed over to Murakami as she screamed.

“No! This can’t be happening! Nooo!!”

A piercing scream even louder than anything before shot through the theater hall. It was the first domino; the audience’s focus shifted from the play to reality and from the ordinary to the unusual. Several people began shouting all at once.

“Th-the actor was stabbed! Somebody killed him! He was murdered!”

“Wait! Don’t move!”

A few people made a dash for the exit; Fukuzawa’s voice didn’t reach them.

A man had been stabbed before their very eyes, and he didn’t know how. But more importantly, the audience’s safety wasn’t guaranteed. It wasn’t reason that told him this; it was Fukuzawa’s instincts.

Fukuzawa then rushed into the audience seating. The killer could have been using this opportunity to escape. In fact, this would be their only chance to escape, since the police were about to cordon off the area. Whoever tried to run would be a suspect. Fukuzawa started grabbing people crowding around the exit and throwing them to the ground, but after one person was taken down, another would come. The chaos only continued. As the crowd violently jostled him, Fukuzawa repeatedly yelled for them to calm down.

Nonetheless, the confusion spread throughout the theater, rendering everyone into wild animals.



Fukuzawa dispiritedly took a seat in the lobby. The theater’s

atmosphere had completely transformed. Staff members and police busily came and went as they discussed matters gravely. The theater had already been cordoned off, and the uniformed officers had closed off the building itself. The staff had found people trying to escape, but they brought them back. Therefore, the killer would still have to be inside, no longer able to flee.

The situation in the theater was quickly dealt with. Ms. Egawa must have informed everyone what to do in case of an emergency. Murakami was taken out in an ambulance, but a few other performers mentioned that he died on the way to the hospital. It was a fatal wound. Fukuzawa had witnessed the moment Murakami was killed. The width of the blade and the amount of blood—it was as if he had been stabbed by an invisible blade.

What in the world was going on?

Fukuzawa knitted his eyebrows.

Where was Ranpo? He disappeared before the curtains raised and hadn't come back. The tragic event took place only minutes after he ran off, exclaiming he was going to stop the killer, but it appeared that not even Ranpo could make it in time. It made sense, though, given the short window he'd had.

But then why hadn't Ranpo returned?

The bad feeling in Fukuzawa's chest was like a weight dragging him down.

What if the murder *didn't occur* because Ranpo didn't find the killer in time?

What if Ranpo had used his inherent gift to find the killer, but then something happened?

What if Ranpo tried to stop the killer? If he tried to get in the killer's way, then that would *make him a threat*.

Knives and bloodshed—a young boy who didn't even know how to defend himself went to find the killer alone.

Fukuzawa couldn't sit around and wait any longer. He'd thought he might run into Ranpo if he waited in the lobby, but now he needed to go search for him.

Fukuzawa stood up and began to walk. Ranpo didn't have enough time to go too far, so asking around if anyone saw him would be his best bet. Fukuzawa visualized the theater's layout in his head. There were three entrances: the front entrance used by the patrons, the dressing room entrance used by the actors and staff, and the service entrance used to transport stage equipment. The front entrance would take playgoers into the lobby, which would lead you to the theater hall and ticket counter. Then the dressing room entrance led to the dressing room, rehearsal room, office, and meeting room. Finally, the service entrance opened into the storage chamber and warehouse with



a passageway to backstage. It wasn't impossible to come and go through these entranceways, but they were essentially closed spaces. Namely, the theatergoers' territory and the troupe's territory were segregated.

If Ranpo disappeared near one of these entranceways, the most suspicious place would be around the unoccupied storage chamber and warehouse. The front entrance was occasionally used by people other than patrons, and performers were waiting for their part around the dressing room, which meant there would be witnesses. Furthermore, the storage chamber and warehouse were closest to where that puzzling murder took place. If there was a place to set up a remote murdering device, then that would be the place, and that would be where Ranpo went to stop it.

Fukuzawa passed by the seats in the theater hall and headed for the stage. Anxious customers sat as they were told to and nervously waited for the situation to change. The panic was gone, but the unusual circumstances still left people in fear. A few theater workers were interviewing the sitting customers one by one, asking them what they had seen and if they noticed anyone gone.

Was the killer among them? Or were they a member of the troupe? Perhaps it was someone who worked at the theater? Fukuzawa suppressed the urge to grab each one of them by the collar and question them as he crossed over the scene of the crime toward backstage.

The backstage area was bare and wide. Wooden boxes and boards were lined up with lighting apparatuses. The two steel wires that ran across the floor must have been rails for swiftly transporting the set.

Fukuzawa looked up at the ceiling from the stage. Right after the murder, he had looked up and seen some sort of metal box past the lights. If that was some sort of remotely controlled device that dropped blades, then it would all make sense.

But there was nothing on the catwalk. He checked backstage just in case, but there was nothing there, either. Were his eyes playing tricks on him? Was there no metal box? Or did the killer get rid of it immediately after the murder? But a device that could drop knives and immediately pull them back up had to be large. If someone had carried such a big object, then Fukuzawa would have seen it. Right as he started to walk away, there was a sudden commotion coming from the lobby. A cop came rushing over before whispering something in a flurry to a worker near the stage.

"What's going on?" Fukuzawa asked after approaching the officer.

The pale-faced officer appeared to have remembered Fukuzawa and immediately answered.

"Th-they're gone! Somebody in the audience disappeared!"

“What?!”



A few officers were talking in the lobby with worried expressions. They showed one another their police notes and went over the current situation. Fukuzawa made sure his footsteps were heard as he approached.

“Hey,” he said to them.

One officer lifted up his head.

“Oh. Hey there. Nice to have ya with us, Watchdog.”

“*Watchdog*”? He wasn’t entirely wrong, but there was something comical about the name. Nevertheless, now wasn’t the time to be correcting people.

Fukuzawa got straight to the point. “I heard one of the patrons escaped.”

“Sure did. We’re still having trouble finding the guy.” The officer rubbed at his cheek in a circular motion. “Just so there’s no confusion, we have all the exits sealed off perfectly. There’s no way anyone got out of this building. I mean, we’re allowing people to go to the restroom or to get first-aid if they’re not feeling well, so getting out of their seat itself isn’t really a problem. But...”

“Did somebody not come back?”

“Exactly. They weren’t in their seat or the bathroom. We can’t find ’em anywhere.”

“Where did they sit? What did they look like?”

The officer used the seating chart to show where the runaway sat. The patron had been seated in the very front.

“It was a middle-aged gentleman wearing an overcoat, a navy suit, and a bowler hat. I asked around, and apparently, he was also using a cane ’cause he had a bad leg.”

Fukuzawa immediately knew who it was.

*Him.*

It was the distinguished gentleman in the front row who was observing the performers—the man who had set off Fukuzawa’s instincts.

“Reservation records say his name is Takutou Asano. Thirty-five years old. He came alone.”

“*Takutou Asano*”? ...*Oh, like Naganori Asano, Takumi no Kami.*

“It’s a fake name,” Fukuzawa immediately pointed out. “Damn it. I shouldn’t have taken my eyes off him.”

Fukuzawa had known there was something suspicious about him, but he’d gotten sloppy and let Ranpo and the sudden turn of events blind him.

“How long ago did he leave his seat?”

“Witnesses say he was still seated when the curtains rose,” replied the officer while he looked at his notes. “But it’s not like we took roll during the second half of the play, so who knows if he was there?”

The second half—in other words, the moment when Murakami was killed.

This meant he could have left his seat for a moment to remotely control some sort of device.

Fukuzawa tried to think back to when he ran onstage. When he looked back into the audience, did he see the man in the suit? It was too hard to say. Fukuzawa clicked his tongue. He couldn’t remember. He was focused too much on the exit then because he figured the killer would have rushed for the door. His eyes were so glued to the last row closest to the door that he neglected to check the seats right in front of him.

*Ranpo would’ve been able to immediately memorize the entire audience with just one glance,* thought Fukuzawa.

*“I want you to keep an eye on the audience!”*

He thought back to what Ranpo had said. Ranpo probably already knew then that the killer was in the audience. That was why he told Fukuzawa to keep an eye open. Yet another oversight on Fukuzawa’s part. The suited gentleman was gone. Ranpo was gone. *Don’t tell me that Ranpo was—*

“I’m going to search the building,” said Fukuzawa. “Contact me if you find anything out.”

“You got it.”

Fukuzawa turned his back to the officer before hastily walking away. He ground his teeth and blamed himself for inspiring Ranpo. In the end, Ranpo went off on his own and disappeared, but it was supposed to be Fukuzawa’s job to stop the killer and protect Ranpo.

No matter how talented Ranpo was, he was still just a kid who lacked the means to protect himself. Even if he confronted the enemy, he would immediately be attacked. He wouldn’t stand a chance. Ranpo might have been a genius detective, but he wouldn’t be able to efficiently exhibit his gift alone. It was meaningless without a shield for Ranpo who could fight back, punish the enemy, and create a safe environment for him to use his talents.

Detectives needed to be *armed*.

“Oh, Fukuzawa! I finally found you.”

A woman up ahead jogged right over to him. It was the theater owner, Ms. Egawa.

“*Sigh*. I’ve been looking all over for you. For someone so tall, you can really disappear when you feel like it. Anyway, we need to talk.” She approached Fukuzawa and immediately grabbed his sleeve.

“What is it? Sorry, but I’m in a hurry. I need to find Ranpo.”

“It’s about Ranpo,” Ms. Egawa replied hastily. “Come on, now. He told me to be discreet.”

“What...?”

Ms. Egawa looked up at Fukuzawa, then whispered secretively, “I have a message from him.”



Ms. Egawa headed toward the theater control room. It was a fully equipped, narrow space packed with a control panel and recording devices. There was a clear bird’s-eye view of the murder scene from the window on the wall. Whoever used the equipment here could watch the play while changing the lighting or background when needed. Ms. Egawa looked around to make sure nobody else was there before closing the door.

“So?” Fukuzawa urged her to go on.

“Honestly, there are a whole load of things I want to ask you as well,” Ms. Egawa ranted. “Like, just who is that boy? He’s full of surprises... How did he know about me?”

“What do you mean?” Fukuzawa shot her a questioning glance.

“Ranpo was looking for the killer. What did he say to you?”

“Hmm? ...Ohhh. Don’t tell me you thought I was the killer. *Giggle.* That’s not what I meant. I was wondering how he knew so much about my personal life. Anyway, he left me a message for you. He said to make sure no one else was listening.”

She was in an uncomfortably wonderful mood. Fukuzawa quietly urged her to continue.

“After Ranpo read me like an open book, he told me there were two people behind this. Then he asked me to help lure the killers out.”

*What?* There were two killers? And he requested the owner to help him catch them?

“Ranpo told me, and I quote, ‘There were two factors to this murder: one that was mediocre and one that was really impressive. You can think of it like a shrimp and a whale. It’d be easy to catch the shrimp, and there’s nothing wrong with that if it’s the best you can manage. Shrimp is great, after all. But if you want to get the whale, you’re gonna have to use the shrimp.’”

Seemed more complicated than necessary.

It was all well and good that Ranpo was being optimistic, but he was still as unruly as ever. At any rate, it was clear there were two people behind this, and it looked as if Ranpo was going after the big one—the whale. That much Fukuzawa understood. But then...did that mean Ranpo was safe?

“Where’s Ranpo?”

“I wish I could tell you, but he gave me that message here only a few moments ago. Also, he told me to tell you, ‘Go back to your seat in the theater. There, the angel will tell you everything.’”

Fukuzawa instinctively looked down at the stage through the control room window. He could see the empty seat where he sat during the performance.

“An angel?”

“Apparently. Hey, Fukuzawa? Be honest with me. Who is that boy? He said he was a skill user and a master detective, but skill users are just made-up fairy tales from plays, aren’t they?”

Ranpo actually wasn’t a skill user, so that part was made-up in a sense. That was exactly why Fukuzawa became worried. Was Ranpo rushing into danger because of his lie?

“Either way, I certainly do believe he’s a master detective. I’m honestly becoming a fan!”

She had come around awfully quickly. Taken aback, Fukuzawa couldn’t help but stare at Ms. Egawa. What did Ranpo say to her that changed her?

“One more thing Ranpo wanted me to tell you. ‘I’m fine, so don’t worry about me. I’m gonna solve this entire case, so hurry back to your seat.’ He said he would make sure nobody else got hurt.”

*“I’m fine, so don’t worry about me.”*

It sounded as if Ranpo knew exactly the situation he was in and was prepared for it. That was why he asked Ms. Egawa to pass on these messages. He was safe, which meant Fukuzawa should follow his instructions and return to his seat.

All he could do was trust the newly born master detective.



The crowd was still stirring from all the commotion, whispering anxiously under the high ceiling lights. An officer was patrolling the area, so no one appeared to be worried for their safety, but even then, they were all facing something they had never experienced before. It would be stranger if they didn’t feel uneasy.

Fukuzawa surveyed the crowd while heading to his seat. He looked across the front row, but the gentleman from earlier was nowhere to be found. He felt he should probably be investigating the man’s disappearance, but he thought back to what Ranpo had said: *“I’m gonna solve this entire case, so hurry back to your seat.”* Ranpo wasn’t in his seat, though. Fukuzawa had thought the boy would be waiting for him so that he could unveil the truth.

Was he running late? Did his plans change?

Whatever the case, Fukuzawa trusted him, so he decided to wait for the time being and took a seat.

Immediately, the lights went out.

Fukuzawa couldn't see a thing. The lights over the audience seating could be darkened completely for the show, but why now? Who turned them off? Even Fukuzawa needed a few seconds before his eyes adjusted to sudden darkness. But before his eyes could adjust...a blinding light lit up center stage. An instant later, laughter echoed throughout the theater.

“Haaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

A silhouette stood in the middle of the stage below the pillar-like spotlight beaming down from above. The small shadow blissfully cackled.

“Look at all the fools—the buffoons—the simpletons! Bless your empty heads! Those horrified expressions on your faces make it look like you're wearing Halloween costumes! I can even see the price tags!”

Fukuzawa's mind went blank.

*What the—? Why? What in the world is going on?*

Ranpo was wearing the glasses. He proudly pushed up the black frames.

Why was Ranpo there? And what was he saying in front of hundreds of spectators? Who turned on the spotlight? Wouldn't the lighting technician be the only one who could do that?

“Your faces are telling me you're wondering why I'm here. I'll tell you why. Because I am the savior! I am a master detective, a skill user, and a child of God! I am the one who appears at the end of the play to solve all the mysteries in one sentence. I am the one who makes everyone say ‘Oh, thank goodness’ in relief before being freed to go home. In other words, I am the *deus ex machina*! Oh, you people are so fortunate! Oh, how I wish I were you! It's time to solve the mystery! A once-in-a-lifetime show! If anyone needs to go to the restroom, then go now! I'll wait!”

The audience stared in awe, mouth agape. Fukuzawa's stomach started hurting.

*Who...? Who told you to go this far...?*

Everyone in the audience had their eyes and mouth open wide as they stared at whatever this was. The few hundred people here were

all united with one common thought.

*What's going on?*

Ranpo confidently pushed up his glasses as if he thought their silence meant they were listening.

“I know how you feel! Watching a mystery story without a solution is more disappointing than staring at the scribbles on a bathroom stall! I have come to unveil the secrets and mysteries to you all, for I am a...skill user!”

After pushing up his glasses, he subtly turned his gaze to Fukuzawa and smiled from ear to ear.





*If only someone could just knock me unconscious right about now...*

Despite the fact that Fukuzawa had met Ranpo only that morning, you would need to combine an entire life's worth of exhaustion and multiply it by three to understand how he felt.

Thanks to Fukuzawa's fatigue, his mind was finally able to catch up with what was going on.

No matter how carrying—scratch that, *obnoxiously loud*—his voice was, it should be impossible to be able to hear it this well in a massive theater that could hold four hundred people. In addition, the lights hanging from the ceiling couldn't be controlled from where Ranpo was standing. There had to be someone working things from the control room.

Fukuzawa looked back at the window at the top of the auditorium. On the other side of the dimly lit window before the control panel was Ms. Egawa, smiling and giving a thumbs-up.

*They were in this together. Accomplices.*

Ms. Egawa must have given Ranpo a small wireless microphone, which was why his voice was projecting so well. From there, she waited for the right moment and used the control panel to turn on the lights just as they had planned.

“Now, join me as I unravel the mystery! I'll be skipping over the boring synopsis of the murder, solely because it'd be boring. After all, what you sad non-skill users really want to know is what happened to the leading actor who was stabbed in the end. Allow me to explain.”

The nausea Fukuzawa had been feeling reached its climax. Ranpo was planning on unveiling the truth from atop the stage. The spectators were still buzzing, but there was a clear change in the mood now.

The audience's focus was slowly returning to the center of the stage where the young man was apparently going to solve the mystery, despite the absurdity of an amateur boasting so openly. The decision of what to do with him could be made after he was finished talking, whether it be putting a stop to him or making a fuss.

Without anyone's knowledge, a deep silence reigned over the crowd. It felt as if the continuation of the play was about to begin. Whether this was Ranpo's objective or pure coincidence wasn't clear, but Ranpo surveyed the silent crowd and confidently smirked before saying:

“Listen carefully. I heard a good bit of you in the crowd whispering that you thought an angel killed him. Sounds like your reasoning is that the timing was perfect, and it looked like he was stabbed by an invisible sword from the sky. So let me just take a moment to say this.” Ranpo paused for a moment. “There is an angel.”

A stir rippled through the crowd. Ranpo raised his hand into the air to cease the uproar.

“To back up this claim, the death threat that was sent to the theater the other day accurately predicted that an angel would kill the performer. It was clearly referring to the ‘angel’ in the play when it was written.”

The crowd started buzzing.

It was no surprise because *the death threat was never made public*.

Fukuzawa was at his wits’ end. From the playgoers’ point of view, the fact that people knew there was going to be a murder beforehand completely changed their view of the situation.

*Was it really okay to tell them that?*

But Ranpo showed no concern for the audience’s worries.

“However, the angel isn’t what you’re imagining. They said it in the play. The angel was invisible to the characters in the story, but the angel could see everything they did. In other words, the angel was the audience. The audience knew almost exactly what was happening but never laid a hand on the characters onstage. It was a metaphor—it meant the angel couldn’t be the killer. If anything, the angel...was a victim.”

Ranpo paused. He surveyed the audience while waiting before he revealed the secret, as if he were trying to build suspense. Then he slowly began to walk across the stage toward the crowd. It was theatrical.

“The murder and the play’s story are connected on a deep level. This play reversed the tide of the narrative. A group of fallen angels tried to return to the heavens, but the angel of judgment tried to stop them. Meanwhile, the angel’s judgment was but a show, and the supposed victim, a human, faked it. The angel’s and humans’ roles were reversed, switching the judge and the judged. That’s the kind of play this was. And this structure isn’t any different...”

After taking in a deep breath, Ranpo continued, “It was applied to the murder itself as well.” He stuck out a finger and pointed at the front-row seats. “As you can see, there is an empty seat here.”

The audience turned their gaze toward the seat. It was where the gentleman suspect had been sitting before running away.

“The city police believe that man was the killer and are looking for him. Why? Because he disappeared right after the murder. I mean, it’s only normal to think that the true culprit ran away. But as I mentioned earlier, the narrative is in reverse. Our structures have been swapped along with the victim and killer as well. In other words—he isn’t the killer, but a victim.”

Thereupon, Ranpo quietly stared into the audience. Nobody said a word. They got lost in what Ranpo was saying, even forgetting to

breathe.

“There is a place in this closed-off theater that not even the police have searched.” Ranpo then turned his back to the audience and started to walk. “Because it’s the worst place for someone who wants to hide. For you see, there would be countless witnesses. Plus, if it isn’t someone who works in the theater, they would stick out like a sore thumb... Just like I am right now. Yes... I am talking about *here*.”

Ranpo walked to the very back of the stage where there was a white screen to project the backgrounds onto. Then he tore down the cloth screen without a moment of hesitation.

“The victim was here all along.”

The gentleman from earlier was tied up and unconscious on the floor. He’d probably been injected with something. Sweat ran down his pale face, and his closed eyes showed no sign of opening anytime soon. Nevertheless, it appeared he was still alive.

“This is the reverse. The killer became the victim. Now...curiosity begs us to ask who was this man, and why was he kidnapped? Of course, all we would have to do is ask the killer that. Isn’t that right, killer?” Ranpo yelled out into empty space, but nobody answered. “The audience is waiting for an answer. A murder story cannot be complete without a killer, and there’s nothing worse than an incomplete story!”

Ranpo roared. It was as if he were a performer himself. A good one, at that. Did he learn how to do this from watching today’s performance? Or...was there a reason why he had to do this?

“This story reversed the tide of narrative. The killer became the victim. *So then...what will the victim become?* It’s time to bring this story to its climax. Nothing else matters at this point. This story won’t be following your script anymore!” Ranpo stomped the floor with the sole of his shoe, and the thud echoed throughout the theater. “This child of God demands you to show yourself, fallen angel! You may be able to fool them, but you cannot fool me! This is the climax! There will be no other ending to your story! Let the truth be revealed to the angel, the son of God, and the blameless people seated here!”

The echoes of his voice gradually died down until the room was overcome with perfect silence. But only for a moment, until another voice soon broke that silence.

“What a marvelous ending!”

The owner of the voice suddenly appeared onstage. Astonishment

fell over the entire theater. His voice echoed with full-bodied resonance. Every part of his body was brimming with life as he moved. It was, without a doubt, the tragic hero.

"I never expected an actual skill user, the stuff of fairy tales, to show up and solve the mystery. After all that, you left me with no choice but to show myself. But how did you know? The police, that bodyguard—not even my fellow performers figured it out."

Murakami appeared onstage as if he had come back from the dead to play a character. He smiled. Ranpo pushed up his glasses and replied, "That's my skill. The blood was real, the weapon was real, and the surprised reactions of the bodyguard and performers were real. But nothing gets past my skill. There was never a murder to begin with."

"How long did you know?" questioned Murakami sonorously.

"From the very beginning." But there was no emotion attached to Ranpo's blunt tone. "When I first met you in the dressing room, you were really pale, and extremely thirsty. That was because you *had your blood drawn* a little earlier. When blood leaves the body, it almost immediately begins to degrade. Plus, you would be surrounded by a bodyguard and the police, who've seen their fair share of blood, when you 'died.' That's why you couldn't use theatrical blood to fake anyone out. You needed to use your own, fresh blood. And the reason why you wore loose-fitting layered clothing was that it was the perfect place for hiding the blade and bags of blood."

"I see."

Ranpo and Murakami faced each other with the center-stage spotlight dividing them. Each stared at the other in silence.

"It would probably have been harder to fake your death without preparing the blood in advance, but you are a professional, after all. All you had to do was put on some makeup to hide your pale complexion, then let your acting do the talking. Also, this is how you faked your pulse. I found it hidden in the trash can near the service entrance."

Ranpo pulled out a skin-colored rubber-made sheet of film from his pocket.

"It's a piece of silicone rubber that actors use to change the shape of their body or face for a costume. I found five times this many torn up in the trash. A quick glance was all it took to see there were enough pieces to cover your wrists and around your chest and neck to make it hard to check your pulse."

Fukuzawa thought back to the incident.

Had the actor's skin felt odd when Fukuzawa checked his pulse? Even looking back, it was hard to tell. At the very least, he was more concerned about Murakami's fate. Fukuzawa had paid no attention to

how the actor's skin felt after briefly touching it.

Most convincing was Murakami's expression. Even Fukuzawa, who had witnessed many deaths before, and the actress who rushed over were fooled. One glance alone was enough to see that it was "too late." Murakami's acting carried complete conviction. Perhaps Fukuzawa would have figured things out as well if it weren't for that.

Ranpo continued his sonorous speech.

"The only thing I had left to do was call the hospital you were transported to. There was an emergency patient named Tokio Murakami who died of his wounds, but when I asked what he looked like, they told me he was an old man in his sixties. You probably switched out IDs with someone who just happened to be similarly injured like you. The police would've figured it out soon enough."

"I had an accomplice." Murakami smiled.

"Figured." Ranpo nodded as if it were obvious. "The playwright?"

"Precisely," answered Murakami. "We planned this together. Probably at home relaxing as we speak."

A few officers rushed out of the theater. They probably left to give orders to apprehend Murakami's accomplice.

"The silicone padding, the hospital, the blood—there was so much evidence that you didn't even have to go looking for it. All that's left is a confession. That's why"—Ranpo suddenly paused before his lips mischievously curled—"I prepared a place better suited for you than a dismal, boring interrogation room with the police. Enjoy."

With that, Ranpo pointed into the air, and the lights went out. The theater was devoured by darkness. Without even a second to react, a thin pillar of light rained down over Murakami's head, and Ranpo vanished into the abyss, as if Murakami were the only one left onstage. Everyone's eyes silently focused on him.

"I...", muttered Murakami in almost a whisper. He raised his voice and continued, "I am an actor! I become someone I am not and live a life that doesn't exist! My job is to expose *what it means to be human*! It doesn't matter if I play the lead part or a minor part. It doesn't matter if I am a villain or hero. I become them with every part of my body! There is no other job for me! This is the only way I can live!"

The audience was captivated. Murakami, who had played and spoken as countless characters onstage, was now speaking genuinely from the heart. His sincerity was so great that the pain accompanying it was palpable. The audience couldn't look away.

"But there is one thing that cannot be avoided while acting on the stage of life, and that is death! Death is not the opposite of life; it is life's symbol and banner. However, it also provides a great paradox! Nobody alive has ever experienced it! That's why to me, the greatest job of all would be performing the death of a person. Not death as a

device or a mere convention, but real death that I could convey to the audience. That was the pinnacle of theatrical performance to me. And this is the outcome of my toil.”

Murakami took a step toward the crowd, then yelled:

“Could you see it? Death is always hanging over our heads! Without a voice, it quietly waits for us! Theater and movies desperately try to express the idea with their structure, editing, music, and thoughtful dialogue. However, they can never express death itself! I am the first to ever perform death! And that is something I wanted everyone who came here today to behold!”

The audience was speechless. Fukuzawa probably felt the same way.

So that was his motive... He sent out a fake death threat and got innocent people involved. He played the victim and fooled the police. He drew his own blood and created two scripts to deceive his colleagues. All this trouble he put himself through...

That was just how important this was to him?

Or were performers simply born this way?

“I have no regrets,” stated Murakami. “This is the way I live. Performers do not need a stage. I will live on from the fruitful outcome of today, performing in others’ hearts until eternal rest is granted unto me.”

Silence reigned. Nobody said a word. Eventually, the police slowly climbed to the stage and handcuffed Murakami. He didn’t resist. He even seemed cheerful. It wasn’t any surprise, though. He had accomplished his goal.

“I thought you were amazing,” Ranpo suddenly said from behind as Murakami was being taken away. “I didn’t quite understand all of it myself, but I don’t think it’s something that just anyone could do. By the way, take a look at the audience. Look at their faces.”

The light from the stage dimly illuminated the crowd. It probably looked like rows of countless faces to Murakami. And everyone’s expression...was the same.

“There are people here from all ages and genders, but they have two things in common. One is that they love your troupe’s acting, which is why they came. The other is they all witnessed the moment someone was killed right before their eyes.”

Murakami stopped breathing. His eyes were glued on the audience.

“You said your job was entertainment, right? But could you really call it that...when you look at their expressions?”

For the first time, Murakami’s eyes showed a sign of weakness.

“...I see.”

A small voice, unlike what one would expect from a stage actor

with a powerful voice, fell from the stage.

“I was...only performing for myself.”

Broken in spirit, Murakami retired from the theater. The lights on the stage disappeared, and only silence followed. There was no drawing of the curtain or curtain call. There was no applause from the audience and no finale to end the play. Only silence.



When Fukuzawa returned to the lobby, Ranpo was proudly waiting for him with his hands on his hips.

“How did it feel?” Fukuzawa quietly asked Ranpo while walking over.

“I feel...”

Ranpo paused with a bold smile, then raised his voice so that the entire lobby could hear him declare:

“I feel sooo much better now!”

*Figured...*

The lobby was jam-packed with patrons who had since been allowed to leave their seats. Some people were calling their family, some were fervently discussing the incident among themselves, others still were idly thinking back about what just happened. On top of that, the city police and the theater staff were busily running in and out of the room, dealing with the aftermath. Some people were angry, some were sad, and some were bewildered. Among the crowd, Fukuzawa thought, *Thank goodness*.

His mind was at ease. Nobody died, and Ranpo solved the case. The rest was trivial. There was a group of three women in the lobby crying. They must have been Murakami’s fans. While passing by, Fukuzawa overheard them saying, “I’m just glad he’s alive!” Fukuzawa basically felt no different.

Looking back, no one could have asked for a more logical approach from Ranpo’s peculiar stage detective work. Even if he just unveiled the truth and the criminal, the criminal would have run away, and the audience would have been traumatized after witnessing a murder. It would have ended only with some light shed on the circumstantial evidence, thus leaving a deep scar on those who worked with Murakami. Just uncovering the truth wasn’t enough. Dragging Murakami out in front of everyone and having him confess was an absolute requirement. But to do that, Ranpo needed Murakami, a born actor, to believe there was no use in hiding any longer. Nothing could have been better than using the audience to draw him out. Ranpo’s entire monologue was for that moment.

“Revealing the truth onstage was a brilliant idea,” complimented

Fukuzawa.

“Right?” Ranpo proudly smirked. “I’d always wanted to scream out whatever I wanted, just once. Did you see the blank looks on their faces? Seems like everyone knows just how amazing I am now! *Whew*. As a master detective, nothing beats unraveling a mystery in front of a large group of people! Just a universal truth.”

Something wasn’t sitting well with Fukuzawa.

“Wait. You unveiled the mystery onstage because—”

“I wanted the attention,” answered Ranpo with a straight face. It was as if he wanted to say, “Of course. Why else would I have done that?”

“.....Oh, okay.”

“Anyway, these glasses are amazing! The moment I put them on, my mind gets sharper, and all deductions reveal themselves to me! Those Kyoto elites sure have some amazing treasures! I feel so alive. I finally understand who I am! With these glasses and my skill, nobody can beat me!”

Ranpo was gleefully scrutinizing the black-framed spectacles. Of course, it was all in his head. There was nothing special about them. Everything Ranpo did, he did himself. He figured out what really happened just from the little information he got in Murakami’s dressing room. It was an extraordinary achievement born from the hastily made fib that his ability was the reason why he knew the truth.

Fukuzawa suddenly remembered a question he had that still had no answer.

“I saw something vaguely square-shaped and metallic behind the lights, close to the ceiling. What was that?”

“Oh, that? Here.”

Ranpo picked up something he had leaning against the wall.

“...Aluminum foil?”

“Yep. Just an ordinary square board. It’s a piece of reflector used for photography. Although it was used to temporarily mess with the investigation this time. I found it just lying on the ground in the shadow of a large prop on the stage wing.”

Fukuzawa groaned. It was light, so it could be easily pulled down with some string and taken home. The main reason Fukuzawa had thought there was an external device that had killed Murakami was because he’d seen the reflection. While it was only supposed to be a temporary decoy, it was created with very fine detail and thought.

“One more thing. How did you convince Ms. Egawa to help?”

Her transformation was significant enough to puzzle even Fukuzawa. She’d handled the lights with a smile and given the thumbs-up. How was Ranpo able to get on her good side like that?

“I didn’t really have to convince her to do anything. The moment I



saw her, I knew she wanted to do stage production—lights, sound, that sort of thing. So I just told her I thought she seemed like she'd be good at it and asked if she could help. That's all. She said she finally made up her mind and was going to start following her dream starting tomorrow."

No wonder she was in such a good mood. Having one's talents complimented by someone as gifted as Ranpo would probably change anyone.

"Good work, you two!" A city police officer briskly approached them and bowed. "That was beautiful; got me right here! When Watchdog here was checking the scene of the crime, I knew he was going to be able to solve this complicated case...but wow! I had no idea he was armed with a secret weapon! Mighty fine work, Detective!"

It was the young uniformed officer whom Fukuzawa was talking to earlier. Ranpo's smug grin widened every time he was called Detective by the officer, while Fukuzawa's expression was best described as *dubious*.

"Leave the rest to us. There's still some paperwork that needs to get done, and we'll need you to come to the station to outline the events for us, but—"

"An outline of the events?" asked Ranpo.

"Yep. Just a basic rundown of what you saw and heard that led you to solving the case."

"Huh...? I mean, that's fine, but my written statement's just gonna say 'Because I'm a skill user.'"

"A—a 'skill user'? You mean like from the play?"

"Uh-huh," Ranpo said with a nod.

*Oh, great. I wasn't expecting that.*

"Officer, wait. Allow me to handle the interview at the station. As you can see, Ranpo is still a boy. He's new to this and exhausted from the investigation. He gave me his version of the incident, so I should be able to—"

"The heck? I'm totally fine. If anything, I feel better now than when we got here."

Ranpo curiously tilted his head. He was telling the truth. His skin had seemed to be glowing ever since he stole the show.

"Wait... This amazing young detective is a skill user?" The officer's eyes opened wide.

"That's right! The skill user capable of knowing the truth behind every case, the master detective Ranpo Edogawa!"

"Wait... Wait." Fukuzawa stopped him in a fluster. "Ranpo, I wasn't going to tell you this, but you're not a skill user. You were able to uncover the truth through observation and reasoning alone. That's

why—”

“Huh?” Ranpo seemed bewildered. “What are you talking about? That’s impossible. Besides, you were the one who told me it was a skill in the first place.”

“Yes, but—”

“The reason I’m special is because I’m a skill user. Do you really think it would be possible for me to see things that others don’t, otherwise?”

“I sure don’t. I am just a dumb cop, though.”

“Listen, you—”

“Oh, hey! Is that a police car?! Whoa! Are we gonna get in that and go to the station?”

“If that’s what you want, I can make it happen.”

“Hold on. Listen to me.”

“Ha-ha-ha! You cops better start buttering me up while you can! I’m sure it’s obvious, but I could steal all your jobs! A skill that can solve cases is a godsend! On second thought, it’s better than that! It’s God itself! I am God!”

“Oh, I’m not worthy! Thank the heavens for bestowing you upon us!”

“H-hold on, you two...”

Fukuzawa was at a loss. The lie he told to save Ranpo was slowly growing. At this rate, the white lie was only going to get bigger until the damage was irreversible.

However...

*“I feel so alive. I finally understand who I am!”*

When Fukuzawa first met Ranpo, the boy was a cynic who had turned his back to the world, but now he was carefree, smiling, and so full of life.

*Forget it.*

Just because it was his extraordinary mind and not a skill didn’t make Ranpo any less exceptional. If anything, his talents would make even a skill user goggle. So one could argue that he was being humble whenever he called himself a skill user. Besides, Ranpo wasn’t always going to be able to solve mysteries with such ease, and when that happened...was he going to find out the truth for himself? Or would Fukuzawa be there to break it to him?

That was when Fukuzawa finally realized his thoughts were heading in a bizarre direction:

—Ranpo solving more difficult mysteries.

—Fukuzawa, right there with him.

“So we’re going to the station, right?”

Ranpo’s voice dragged Fukuzawa back into reality.

“I really wanna ride in the police car, but just thinking about

doing paperwork and being interviewed is boring me to tears. I'm just gonna get in there and out in two seconds and go home. It'll probably take forever to get it over with if you're there, old guy, so I'll go on ahead, okay?"

Fukuzawa didn't reply.

"Hey, you listening? I'm leaving...?"

"...Hmm? Oh, okay."

Ranpo looked up at Fukuzawa for a few moments.

"Oh? I see... Anyway, about ready to go, Officer?" Ranpo asked before patting the officer on the back.

*Absurd. Working together with Ranpo from now on? Solving cases together? Absolute nonsense.*

However, Ranpo was truly extraordinary. Somebody had to protect that talent and utilize it to its fullest potential. On the other hand, Fukuzawa had always been alone ever since that one incident. He didn't need anyone's help, and he didn't feel the need to work together with others. To Fukuzawa, depending on others meant there was something he lacked. Deliberately ignoring his own shortcomings and relying on others would only warp who he was.

He could also become a demon that killed others if his allies so requested. He could hardly even imagine teaming up with someone, let alone creating an agency and becoming its leader.

Many people had witnessed Ranpo's talents bloom today. Nobody was going to put him on phone duty or make him run errands at a construction site ever again. Whether it be for good or evil, somebody was going to use Ranpo's talents and do something big. Perhaps the day would come when he would rise to the top of some group of thieves or an illegal organization. But that day wasn't today; therefore, it had nothing to do with Fukuzawa himself.

"I'm going to discuss the aftermath with Ms. Egawa," Fukuzawa said to Ranpo. "You go ahead to the station. Officer, take good care of him for me."

"You got it," the officer replied with a smile.

"Come on! Let's go!"

Ranpo hopped over to the exit with mirth in his step, and Fukuzawa's eyes were naturally drawn to him. All of a sudden, Ranpo stopped at the exit and turned around.

"Mr. Fukuzawa," he said with a smile. "Thank you."

And just like that, he got into the police car and left.



Fukuzawa went to see Murakami after that. The dressing room was being used as a temporary interrogation room. Inside were three

guards and Murakami sitting in the center. When the actor saw Fukuzawa, he feebly smiled before lowering his head.

"I've done a lot of things in my life, but this is the first time I've ever been handcuffed." He showed the handcuffs around his wrists and smiled. "Everything's an experience. This'll only enrich my acting."

Fukuzawa was both exasperated and impressed at the same time. It appeared that performers faced a fate incomprehensible to most.

"I have two or three things I want to ask you."

"Be my guest."

"I want to see the device that made the blade come out of your stomach."

"Oh, that? It's over there."

Murakami pointed at the device with his chin. Leaning against the wall was a thin, cylindrical instrument that looked as if a sheet of metal had been bent into a circle. It was as thick as a human's torso, with piano string-like wire with a loop on the end sticking out.

Murakami explained how he wrapped it around his waist and hid it under his clothes. Then he ran the piano wire through his costume and pulled it to tug the metal plate over his stomach open. The metal plate was thin, and its surface was finely polished, which was probably what made it look like a blade under the powerful lights. It was a rather simple device to understand after hearing how it worked. It was a device only a theatrical performer would have thought of due to his familiarity with how props appeared to the audience.

"The biggest hurdle was seeing whether it would fool the first person who came running over," Murakami boasted with a smirk. "I knew you were used to seeing dead bodies, being a bodyguard and all. That's why I was cheering on the inside when my acting fooled you. It's an accomplishment I'll be proud of for the rest of my life."

And as a result, everyone in the crowd was deceived, and the police were utterly confused. Fukuzawa couldn't blame him, especially since he wasn't the type to lecture others. He simply said, "You're hopeless."

"You could say that again." Murakami smiled.

"There is one more thing I want to ask you," continued Fukuzawa. "It's about the man in the suit who was tied up and unconscious. Who is he? Why did you do that to him?"

"Oh, that guy? I heard he's...another one of the plan's objectives," said Murakami with a shrug.

"You 'heard'?"

"Yes. Originally, I came up with this plan with the playwright, Kurahashi, but he apparently had his own goals in mind. I don't know all the details...but apparently that man in the suit rarely ever shows

himself, so meeting him was one of Kurahashi's goals or something. I wasn't expecting him to catch the guy and tie him up, though."

"What?" Fukuzawa knitted his brows, at which moment—

"The suspect! Bring me the suspect!"

—what sounded like pounding footsteps was immediately followed by the door to the dressing room being thrown open. A slightly older detective stood at the doorway, trying to catch his breath.

"What happened?" asked Fukuzawa.

"W-Watchdog! We've got big trouble! Has the suspect been here this entire time?!"

"He's been under surveillance the whole time, as you can see."

Fukuzawa glanced at the nervous-looking actor, whose eyes were darting back and forth between Fukuzawa and the detective. It seemed he had no idea what was going on.

"The playwright—he was found dead in his home! Somebody killed him!"

"What?!"

The detective spoke while trying to catch his breath, his eyes shaking with fear.

"The door to his room was locked, and something impaled him from behind—but there was no weapon or any signs of a struggle at the scene! It's like an invisible person just came in and stabbed him!"



Ranpo Edogawa sat in the back of the police car alone, idly gazing at the nightscape as it went by. The sun had disappeared before anyone even noticed. As darkness with hints of blue hung over the city of Yokohama, only white and yellow lights drew his eye as they drifted across the car window's glass like rain. Ranpo stared at the city while resting his elbow on the door. The city's night was bright. The countryside he grew up in didn't have artificial light, and everyone would be getting ready for bed at this hour.

*The city is so much better.*

Ranpo was absorbed in thought. Boisterous and puzzling still beat out quiet and dismal in his book. He hated the countryside. He hated the people, the school, and essentially everything else there. The only thing he liked was his parents.

"Hey, Officer." Ranpo suddenly struck up conversation with the young cop driving. "How much longer until we get there?"

"We're almost there," the officer answered with a bright, amiable tone.

"Oh," Ranpo vaguely replied before returning his gaze to the city.

After glancing at Ranpo through the rearview mirror, the officer cheerfully said:

“You really impressed me today! Seriously, that deduction made me emotional! You’re a real mini detective! You and Fukuzawa make a great team together. I can already see your name in tomorrow’s morning paper!”

“Eh, what can I say? But I don’t think that old guy’s gonna team up with me.”

“Huh? Really? I totally thought you two were—”

“He’s afraid of others,” Ranpo bluntly stated.

A few seconds of silenced passed through the car.

“Uh... That bodyguard guy’s supposedly a master martial artist. Plus, he’s known to be extremely scary... I heard even the police and military’s top brass get nervous when they meet him.”

Many members of police organizations hold qualifications in kendo and jujutsu. At times, their respect for masters of the art, be in a senior disciple or instructor, surpasses professional rank and position. Therefore, a martial artist of Fukuzawa’s caliber had quite a bit of influence in these organizations. In a sense, Fukuzawa was feared by both villains and police alike.

“It’s not quite the same. The old guy is afraid of something else.”

“Uh-huh... If you say so. You never cease to impress me. You just met Fukuzawa, and yet you’ve already seen right through him. I guess you can never underestimate the power of skill users, huh? What was it again? ‘The ability to uncover the truth?’”

“Yep,” confirmed Ranpo with a relaxed nod. “But you don’t believe that, do you?”

“Wait, wait, wait. Of course I do,” the officer replied in a panic. He then assumed a fake smile in a troubled manner. “Heh... I guess the cat’s out of the bag?”

“You wouldn’t even need to be a skill user to see through you. You mentioned that I had ‘just met Fukuzawa,’ which meant you called headquarters and found out that he and I first met this morning during the case of the murdered CEO. Why? Because you wanted to know how good I was.”

“I’m impressed. I underestimated you.”

“I don’t blame you. I don’t like being doubted, so...how about I prove to you that I’m a skill user?”

Ranpo pulled out a pair of black-framed glasses from his pocket—his priceless gift from Fukuzawa.

“Oh, are you sure? What a treat. Feels like I’ve got a front-row seat to the honored skilled detective’s show.”

Ranpo put on his glasses with a sigh, then looked out the window.

*“This car isn’t going to the police station, is it?”*

Silence. Ranpo and the officer exchanged glances through the rearview mirror until a few moments went by.

“*Sigh.* You got me,” admitted the officer as he scratched his cheek. “I should have mentioned it before, but I got a call over the radio earlier. They told me there was an accident and to bring the great detective with me.”

“I see,” said Ranpo. His tone conveyed no indication as to how he was feeling.

“But you wouldn’t need to be a skill user to guess that much, right? I mean, I’m not doubting you, though. I just thought that since the police station was near the train station, it would be pretty obvious that we weren’t going there.”

“You’re exactly right.” Ranpo grinned. “Shall we raise the bar, then? How about this? You’ll ask questions about today’s incident, and I’ll use my skill to answer. If I get stumped, you win. If I uncover all the mysteries, I win. How does that sound?”

“Oh, now we’re talking! It doesn’t matter whether I win or lose because this is going to be fun! There’s no reason for me to say no! Can I start?”

“Be my guest,” Ranpo said.

The officer then pondered to himself for a few seconds while tilting his head.

“I’m sure this is something everyone wanted to ask, but...” The officer tapped the steering wheel with his finger as he spoke. “Like, you remember that man in the suit who was tied up onstage? The one who used the fake name. How was he captured and carried to that spot behind the screen?”

“Using a rug,” replied Ranpo while pushing up his glasses with a finger. “There were a few long-haired rugs near the theater entrance, right?”

The officer looked up while rubbing his chin with a finger. “Oh... There were, now that you mention it.”

“After the panic, one of those rugs went missing,” claimed Ranpo. “The floor was bare, and there was a faint but strange smell coming from where the rug used to be. What’s that stuff called again? The stuff you find in paint and plastic that has that weird smell...”

“Organic solvent?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Ranpo nodded. “It was faint, but I smelled the same thing coming from the man who was tied up. In other words, the criminal wrapped that man up in the carpet and carried him there. The smell was probably coming from an adhesive. The criminal used a spray adhesive on the carpet to catch that suited man as he tried to escape. Then he used some drug to knock him out before rolling him up in the rug and taking him away. That man must be really good at

running away for someone to go through that much trouble.”

“Hmm... Well, the stage was very hectic after the incident with ambulance crew and performers cleaning up blood and whatnot, so I guess if someone came walking through with a rug, they wouldn’t really stand out... But why? I know the accomplice was probably the one who carried him, but why would he go through all that trouble?”

“It wasn’t the playwright.”

“Huh?”

“The playwright didn’t even lift a finger. In fact...*he was probably killed before the play even started*,” Ranpo added as if it were obvious. A change came over the officer’s countenance.

“Th-that can’t... Then who?”

“Everyone—other than me, of course—is so stupid and foolish and oh so lovable for it, which is why I wanted to save as many people as I could,” Ranpo said as he languidly rolled his neck. “But there’s nothing I can do for people who die before I know the truth, and that includes that elderly man who was killed solely to deceive.”

“Elderly man...?” asked the officer.

“I’m talking about that poor elderly man who died at the hospital in Murakami’s place,” said Ranpo with a subtle lift of his brow. “When I was explaining how I solved the mysteries, I lied that Murakami probably switched out IDs with someone who just happened to be similarly injured like him. But wouldn’t that just be too convenient for something so important to the trick? It was unnatural. It wouldn’t make sense for someone who was elaborate and bold with his scheme to leave things to luck like that. They waited for the perfect moment to stab and kill that elderly man. *Sigh*... All that just to kidnap a single man?”

“Do you mean...the murder wasn’t the objective?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. This large-scale scheme was put together solely for the purpose of kidnapping that gentleman in the suit. It was one long, elaborate trap. The playwright and Murakami were being used as well. They’re nothing more than pawns, too... Now do you believe I’m a skill user?”

“I—I...”

Ranpo leaned toward the flustered officer. “So how about you just tell me where this car is *really* heading?”

He then brought his head to the side of the driver’s seat and whispered into the man’s ear:

“I can smell organic solvent on your clothes, Officer.”



“Why can’t you get ahold of him?!” roared Fukuzawa.



The second floor of the theater was being used as a temporary police station where they were holding a meeting.

“I told you, I wish I could, but they still haven’t arrived at the station. They should have had plenty of time to get there, though...”

Three officers were sitting in the theater’s conference room while exchanging information with their colleagues over the phone. The moment Fukuzawa heard that the playwright had been killed, he knew. The case still wasn’t over yet. If anything, this was only the beginning.

Because...

*“There were two factors to this murder... You can think of it like a shrimp and a whale.”*

Ranpo knew that from the very start. He knew there were two sides to this case. He figured out there was a greater, more sinister side to this other than the staged murder. The playwright was dead. This wasn’t a sham, but a real murder. Murakami had been clearly flustered ever since he heard the news. He was honestly confused and kept asking the police to explain things over and over again.

Fukuzawa felt in his gut that this wasn’t an act. While he was nowhere near as talented as Ranpo when it came to observation and reasoning, Fukuzawa had sharp enough insight to see that Murakami’s fear was real. Even a famous performer like him had forgotten how to act. Regardless, the playwright’s house where he was found was rather far away from the theater, and Murakami had been under police surveillance ever since Ranpo finished his stage monologue. Timewise, it would have been physically impossible for him to go to the playwright’s house, kill him, and return to the theater before that.

Who was really the one pulling the strings?

Who was the real culprit?

According to Ranpo:

*“It’d be easy to catch the shrimp...but if you want to get the whale, you’re gonna have to use the shrimp.”*

He’d probably already figured out who the “whale” was. Murakami was obviously the shrimp. Ranpo implied that the shrimp was the mediocre part of this case. It made sense, though. Nobody died, and solving the case itself wasn’t that difficult, either. Even without Ranpo, Murakami wouldn’t have been able to live as a dead man and hide out for the rest of his life. The truth would have come to light.

But in the end, only half the case was solved. There was someone pulling the strings who used Murakami and the playwright for their scheme. The only person who could have answered that was dead. Now the only one who could follow the lost path to the real criminal...was Ranpo.

What if Ranpo's sensationalized monologue onstage was all part of a bigger plan? What if his plan to catch the whale was still ongoing?

"What was the name of the police officer taking Ranpo to the station?" Fukuzawa asked.

"Jun Mitamura," answered the detective, intimidated by Fukuzawa.

"Why can't you reach him?"

"That's odd... His cell phone is turned off. He isn't answering his radio, either."

Fukuzawa began to get impatient.

What happened during the short amount of time he took his eyes off Ranpo? It didn't matter that the kid was a quick-thinking genius. Even if he had already found out who was behind this and was trying to lure them out, he wouldn't stand a chance if they attacked him. He was still just a boy, and the darkness of this lawless city was rampant with violence. Some wouldn't even hesitate to kill a child like Ranpo.

"I'll go look for them." Fukuzawa quickly retired from the conference room.

Something had to have happened to Ranpo while he was heading to the station. Fukuzawa racked his brain, briskly walking forward. Did Ranpo have a plan? But he had no idea how corrupt this city was. Ranpo thought he knew everything, but he wasn't a skill user. There was no way for him to know something unless he saw it with his own eyes.

And the one who made Ranpo believe he was a skill user was none other than Fukuzawa himself. He strode through the lobby until he reached the front entrance. Most of the patrons had left, and the area was now quiet. The moment he walked outside, he caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye where Ranpo had gotten into the police car. When he strained his eyes, he saw something white by the building's wall and decided to check it out. It was a white business card. A rock was lying on top, perhaps to keep it from being blown away by the wind. When Fukuzawa got close enough, he immediately recognized that it was his business card.

*It can't be—*

He picked it up, and sure enough, it did have his name and contact information on it. He couldn't discern who he originally gave it to, though. Fukuzawa flipped the card over. Messily written on the back in pencil was:

***Mitamura is the real culprit. Search for the cane.***



“No way. Come on.” Mitamura shook his head while smiling as he drove. “I can’t believe such an extraordinary skill user slipped under our radar.”

Ranpo didn’t respond. He simply stared at Mitamura through the rearview mirror with his young, piercing gaze behind the glasses.

“I guess it would be impolite to make excuses or deny it in the face of such a master detective. Now that you’ve found me out, I should probably do the right thing and tell you the truth and my motives,” Mitamura continued with a smile. “Just wait a little bit longer, please. There’s a more fitting place up ahead for me to welcome you, Master Detective.”

“All right, but make it quick,” Ranpo demanded with indifference. “It’s already late, so I’m getting tired.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The police car drove through the city night until it reached a seemingly empty commercial district. Driving down a road with no streetlights, they soon reach a brand-new four-story building and park.

“We’re here. Officially, this building’s an office for a ‘shipbuilding company’ if you know what I mean,” Mitamura joked while looking up at the building. “In reality, we own it. It’s what they call a shell company. Now, come. Please watch your step.”

Ranpo got out of the car as requested, and they walked through the empty building’s front door. At a glance, it looked just like any other building in the city. However, there were no lights on inside, nor were there any guards. As Mitamura and Ranpo continued to walk, all that illuminated the dusk was the greenish hue of the emergency lights.

“This way, please.”

Mitamura opened a glass door. The room was empty, but one of the walls was completely made from glass, giving a clear view of Yokohama’s skyline in the distance. Ranpo started entering the room as requested before speaking up.

“A gun?”

“Hmm?”

“That thing. The gun.”

Ranpo pointed at Mitamura’s waist. Hanging there was a city police-issued black revolver.

“I’ve never wanted to die before, but I don’t want it to hurt when I do. I’ve thought about it, though. The moment the bullet pierces your head probably hurts. But I’ve never talked to a dead guy before, so I can’t say for sure.”

“Ha-ha. I’m not going to shoot you with this.” Mitamura smiled while touching his gun. Then his eyes narrowed. “...As long as you do as I say.”



Fukuzawa quickly passed through the empty theater's hallway to the auditorium. Everyone had already gone home, and only Fukuzawa's footsteps eerily echoed. His expression was intense, but there was no hesitation in his gaze. There was only one thing that came to mind when he saw the word *cane*. He casually climbed up onto the stage, stepped over the faint stain of blood, and headed toward the back.

Fukuzawa immediately found the cane. Underneath the white fabric screen that Ranpo tore down was a T-shaped cane casually lying on the ground. It was somewhat old, but the grip had gold foil decorations embedded in it, suggesting high-end quality. The polished body seemed to be made from a camellia tree. It was the cane that the suited gentleman had been using.

Fukuzawa hadn't heard where the owner of the cane was currently. Some said he was taken to the hospital, while others said he ran away to avoid any complicated matters that may have followed. If he ran away, then there would be no way of finding him now. The cane was what was important at the moment. Fukuzawa immediately noticed something was off when he held it: The center of gravity was somewhat high. Such a small oddity would be noticed only by someone who had held countless wooden swords and real swords, such as Fukuzawa. He carefully checked the handle and noticed a pronounced gap among the decorative gold. Something about as thick as a sheet of paper could be slid into the crack.

He first thought it was a sword cane, a typical weapon for an assassin. It was deadly, as well as something Fukuzawa used on rare occasions, so he was very familiar with them.

But this was different. There wasn't enough space to hide a blade. Then what could it have been used for?

He held down the hidden notch while twisting the handle until the decorations indeed came off, revealing the inside.

"...?"

It was empty. No weapon, no drugs—there was nothing there. It was just a hollowed-out piece of wood.

*Why would Ranpo ask me to find this?*

Fukuzawa looked into the cavity. It was surprisingly deep. Using what little light he had, he measured the depth. A document could fit inside if it were rolled up first.

—A currently empty crevice.

—A document.

*I see.*

Fukuzawa figured it out: *Whatever was inside had already been taken.* It was only reasonable to come to such a conclusion. There was

probably something inside it when the suited gentleman was carrying it. Was he bringing it somewhere? Or was he simply trying to keep it close by? He was knocked unconscious, and whatever was in there—perhaps a document of some sort considering the size—was stolen. Then the cane was tossed away after serving its purpose.

The mystery of the suited gentleman, the mystery of the empty cane, and the mystery of the real culprit who had stolen what was inside—there were many questions stemming from this single cane. But it gave no clues to what Fukuzawa needed to know the most: Where was Ranpo?

So Ranpo didn't leave that message to tell Fukuzawa where he was. And the message was clearly from Ranpo; nobody else would have left a note accusing someone of being the true culprit. Was there something else to this cane?

Fukuzawa pondered. Ranpo didn't have time to touch or check the cane. Even then, he knew there was more to it, which is why he told Fukuzawa to find it. While Ranpo may have had unattainable heights of insight, he figured something out about the cane without even touching it. Failing to find out what that was even after examining it was starting to make Fukuzawa feel as if he had failed as an adult.

The only thing that caught Fukuzawa's attention was how relatively easy it felt getting to the hidden cavity. This would be fine for sword canes that needed to be unsheathed at the drop of a hat, but it had to be a lot harder to open for something that was solely made to hide a document.

Fukuzawa discovered the cavity almost instantly. The person who stole whatever was inside probably found out how to open it quickly as well. Perhaps it was a slight oversight.

But from Fukuzawa's point of view, this carelessness didn't match with the impression he had. The gentleman was big game. The culprit had to set up this entire scheme to catch him, since he was so cautious that he had tried to escape the theater the moment he detected something was wrong.

Which meant there was only one other possibility.

Fukuzawa observed the cavity once more. It was perfectly curved without a scratch. He touched it with a finger. To his senses, the polished wood felt almost like a perfect circle. He put his finger in the hole and held the inside while firmly pulling the cane. After a few moments, he felt the inside slightly move. He pulled some more. Thereupon, the inside of the cane *popped* right out. It was what they call a false bottom, a gimmick to trick thieves into stealing whatever unimportant thing was stuffed in the first cavity. In other words, the real hiding place was in the back side of the interior cylinder.

Fukuzawa gazed into the cylinder he pulled out and instinctively

knitted his brows. The back side was an electronic memory device. There was nothing else suspicious about it. Bonded onto the surface of the cylinder was a curved circuit board. Even Fukuzawa almost immediately knew what he was looking at: an ultrathin memory terminal. The hidden cavity was a red herring. While it was a false-bottom cane, the walls of the cylinder itself were the real carriers of information. Fukuzawa had heard rumors of an organization who transported information like this.

“Then that means....” Fukuzawa grunted.

That suited gentleman was a *skill user*, and he was hiding from a criminal syndicate after him. Now there was finally enough information to reason who the real culprit was.

Fukuzawa began to walk without even a second of hesitation. He could finally see, albeit dimly, the whale that Ranpo was trying to catch.



“So where are we?” Ranpo indifferently asked as he stared out the window.

“One of our more convenient bases. As you can see, we can do whatever we want at night without being seen or heard here. It’s the perfect place to do anything, whether it be hiding, having a secret meeting, or—”

“Torturing someone?” Ranpo blurted out, causing Officer Jun Mitamura to raise his eyebrows in a theatrical show of surprise.

“Oh my. I thought I made myself clear earlier. I brought you here simply so we could welcome the great detective into our home. The thought of torture didn’t even cross my mind. This is all one big misunderstanding.”

“Those are a lot of armed guards for a misunderstanding. There were four—no, five of them, weren’t there?” claimed Ranpo with a nonchalant shrug. Mitamura fell silent, seemingly caught by surprise. The guards were perfectly hidden. They were all hired from the outside—foreign ex-military—and they had been trained to be able to observe their target without leaving a single trace. They had been watching from a blind spot, not once ever leaving a footprint or clearing their throat.

“Wow... You never cease to impress me.” Mitamura scratched his head in a troubled manner. “How did you know?”

“I told you already. That’s my skill,” said Ranpo as he put on his glasses.

“Hmm...” After thinking for a moment, Mitamura spread out his arms as if to show he meant no harm. “Well done. But I want to make

sure this is clear so that there are no misunderstandings. Those men have absolutely no interest in harming you. They were originally brought here to stand guard and keep an eye on the target—the man in the suit who you revealed onstage to the entire audience. So, essentially, they are just working overtime right now. After all, who knows what kind of lawless thug might come after the world’s greatest detective?”

“Lawless thug, huh...? Wish I knew who you were referring to. Anyway, why’d you bring me here?” asked Ranpo as he took a seat in the nearby chair.

“We have ourselves a little situation. As you well know, we had a rather elaborate plan in motion at the theater, so the higher-ups are pretty pissed off. They told me to catch the guy who messed everything up. Wanted me to make you talk. Figure out how you knew the truth. Figure out where you got that leaked information. Rather shortsighted if you ask me. Oh, and don’t even get me started on the confidential document I found in that man’s cane. Good grief. It was a fake. Can you believe it?” Mitamura shrugged melodramatically. “Of course, it’s a big deal if someone leaked our plan to an outside source. It’s a matter of internal discipline, after all. But you and me, Great Detective, know that’s not the case. It was all thanks to your supernatural ability. That’s why it doesn’t matter how hard I squeeze you to get an information source out of you. It doesn’t exist, right?”

“...”

Mitamura glanced at Ranpo’s silent expression before continuing.

“But you know how it is with honor and dignity and all that. I can’t let you go that easily, so I’m having a little dilemma here. As things are now, the boss is going to make us hurt you even though we don’t want to, and you wouldn’t want that, right? I know I wouldn’t. So here’s my offer...”

Mitamura took a step forward in the dim room. His shadow grew lengthwise in the light coming through the window from the night outside. He sat before Ranpo, who was closing his eyes, then whispered:

*“...How about joining us?”*

An uncomfortable silence reigned over the room.

“We are men with ambition. Our only wish is to cleanse this country of evil, and we would love to have a talented skill user such as yourself. What do you say?”

The backlight obscured Mitamura’s face in the darkness, but one could easily imagine his cold, thin smile from the abyss.

“...Hmm?” Ranpo, sitting down, lifted his head up and looked in the direction of the gaze. “Oh, sorry. You just kept going on and on, so

I got bored and stopped listening... Could you make it more interesting next time?"

Mitamura's face froze. A tense air filled the room.



Fukuzawa was rushing toward an underground prison. It was a square, one-story building adjacent to the police station. He had already contacted them in advance, so he greeted the guards and headed straight down the long staircase. Unlike a detention cell that temporarily held suspects, the facility was built with the principal aim to keep any criminals from ever leaving. Fukuzawa reached a thick steel double door. There were no windows in the cell, and the walls were reinforced with steel frames. In the back was a boy.

"You awake?"

The boy wore a straitjacket and was constrained with multiple chains in the empty concrete room. He slowly looked up. His empty, emotionless eyes were a reddish brown. Fukuzawa looked through the narrow observation window on the door and saw the assassin's face. It was the hit man from this morning who'd killed the secretary. He quietly stared at Fukuzawa from under his short crimson hair, not so much as a hint of emotion in his eyes.

"How's the cell?"

"Not as bad as some others. The air-conditioning works."

Even Fukuzawa, who had faced numerous villains and assassins, had never seen eyes like his. Most skilled hit men looked down on others as if they were insects. Their eyes were cold and lacked compassion. But this boy's were different. They weren't cold or any temperature. They were just empty. Not only was there no compassion or kindness, there was no hate or passion to kill. His eyes were those of a person who had given up all hope and despair—the eyes of a person who had removed himself from emotional things.

*This kid's different from the old me. Perhaps he never felt any joy from killing others. He was probably only killing because he had nothing else to do.*

"I came because there's something I want to ask you," Fukuzawa said, facing the observation window. "Have a look at this."

Fukuzawa held out the case toward the observation window, showing the cylinder with the memory device.

"This is a memory device used by a certain national organization. It needs special equipment to be deciphered, and stealing the information inside is next to impossible. It's used by people under the witness protection program so they can remain invisible to the public while exchanging information with the witness protection



organization. In other words, key figures targeted by criminal organizations would possess this device. Furthermore, there's something all these key figures have in common. *They're all skill users.*"

Fukuzawa closely observed the hit man, but the hit man's gaze didn't change.

"Now let's talk about why I'm here. You are a highly skilled assassin who's worked for outside organizations as well, I'm sure. So have you received any *requests to capture a skill user* as of late?"

The boy didn't answer.

"Which is it?"

"...I can't reveal my clients," answered the boy in a hoarse voice.

"Doesn't have to be about your clients' requests." Fukuzawa tried to bargain. "Have you heard recently about anybody around here searching for someone who could capture a skill user alive? It's a difficult target, someone who pops up randomly and is currently under the witness protection program. The client would have asked for this man to be found and captured alive in secret. The payment would have been exceptional, and the client would have kept their identity confidential. The client would have probably called themselves 'Angel' or 'V.'"

The moment the boy heard the name "V," his shoulders twitched. *This assassin knows something*, Fukuzawa thought.

The government, which didn't officially acknowledge the existence of skill users, was secretly protecting those skill users, and the gentleman in the suit was most likely one of them. They were preeminent figures even in this city, beings sought after by foreign military parties, domestic criminal organizations, and countless enemies. It wasn't clear why these people were after them, but it wouldn't be a stretch to say they held secrets connected to the foundation of the country.

A run-of-the-mill group of thugs wouldn't even be able to find a footprint left by someone of that caliber. Even if they did find them, they wouldn't be able to break through the witness protection organization's police line unless they were a top-class assassin. Plus, the organization behind this—the so-called V—refused to dirty their own hands. They would solely use people from the outside.

That was why an assassin of this level would have surely heard of a job like this. There was no way "V" would ignore such a convenient hit man who was talented but didn't work for any specific group.

"...I don't want to talk about them." The young man finally spoke up. He had a boy's voice, but his tone sounded like a worn-out elderly man with no emotions. "Do you know what their goal is?"

"No," replied Fukuzawa.

All he knew was that this criminal organization set up an entire scheme and got everyone in the theater involved just to capture one man.

“Justice,” said the hit man. “I can understand killing for money or because you hated someone, but they’re killing *for justice*. I don’t want to get involved with a group like that. After they’re done killing for their justice, they’ll only continue to kill. They’ll just stop caring who they’re killing.”

Those were heart-wrenching words to Fukuzawa, and he almost uttered a cry.

“I’m not ordering you to fight them,” Fukuzawa said, managing to keep his voice calm. “They kidnapped my friend. Do you know of any place they could be keeping him?”

The boy shot a piercing gaze at Fukuzawa. His eyes were open wide.

“...I’ve got no reason to tell you.”

“True,” agreed Fukuzawa. “But if you do tell me, I wouldn’t mind testifying that the secretary’s death this morning was the result of an accident during a struggle. You’d be released tomorrow.”

Something like surprise faintly wavered in the boy’s gaze. “...Are you being serious?”

Fukuzawa nodded in silence.

“I’m shocked.” The boy shook his head. “I didn’t think you were the kind of person who would turn their back on justice for a deal.”

Fukuzawa himself was just as taken aback. Never once had he made a deal with a criminal. However, it was surprisingly easy for him to make this decision. Maybe he would regret things by tomorrow. Maybe he would remember this decision and feel guilty one day. But now, at this moment, there was neither contradiction nor regret in Fukuzawa’s heart.

He had to save Ranpo...because Ranpo was an *idiot*. He was naive and rash and still just a kid who didn’t think through things far enough. In fact, he was foolish enough to use himself as bait to lure out the real culprit.

Fukuzawa had come to this conclusion on his way to the underground prison. Ranpo allowed himself to be kidnapped to lure out the enemy, and he intended to have Fukuzawa save him. That was probably a flawless plan to Ranpo. It was probably the only way to drag out the real culprit, who would never show their face in public otherwise.

If that was what Ranpo was thinking, then that would make him extremely foolish.

Fukuzawa had to find Ranpo, but if he were outnumbered and outclassed when he found the enemy’s hideout, then Ranpo would still

be killed. They weren't the kind of people who would let someone live after they knew the truth. What Ranpo thought was a bright idea was not even worth considering from Fukuzawa's point of view. It was as foolish as swimming in a swamp in the middle of winter, and that was exactly why Fukuzawa couldn't abandon him.

"So? Will you take the deal?"

The assassin stared at Fukuzawa for a few moments.

"This facility isn't that bad," admitted the boy as he looked around the room. "Besides, I can escape whenever I want on my own, so your offer isn't worth it."

It would take at least a fully armed platoon to escape from this facility. And yet, Fukuzawa's gut told him that this boy wasn't lying.

"Then what would be worth your time?"

The boy quietly stared at the floor for a few seconds.

"I've been working alone as an assassin for as long as I can remember," he began. "I've never wanted friends or a boss, but... seeing a master martial artist like you compromise your principles to save one of your men... It makes me kinda jealous. He must be the happiest guy in the world to have you as his boss."

Fukuzawa was about to correct him.

Ranpo wasn't his subordinate, and he wasn't cut out to be anyone's boss. If anything, he was the same as this boy. He avoided organizations and bonding with others.

However, what came out of Fukuzawa's mouth was:

"You think so?"

The words that slipped off his tongue were completely different from what he wanted to say. The boy quietly nodded.

"I heard they use a few buildings to do business. You should probably start checking the ones closest first."

Fukuzawa was at a loss for words until the boy looked up at him.

"This place gives me a bed, and it's got air-conditioning, but the food's awful," said the boy. "I heard you had some influence over the higher-ups in the police force. Could you hook me up? That's all I need."

Fukuzawa slightly narrowed his eyes, then asked, "Any requests?"

The boy gave the faintest of smirks. He then replied:

"Curry."



"Listen, Master Detective Ranpo. This is the best deal you are going to get. It's either you take the deal, or they squeeze the information out

of you. Which is it going to be? I don't think you're in any position to negotiate."

Mitamura took a step forward. Sitting in a chair and swinging his legs about, Ranpo absentmindedly replied, "Negotiate"? I have no intention of negotiating, and when the conversation doesn't interest me, it just goes in one ear and out the other. Just sounds like a cow mooing to me. Moooo."

Mitamura's eyebrow suddenly twitched. Still, he rubbed his forehead in an attempt to hold back his emotions.

"Listen, Ranpo. You're extremely lucky that I'm the one here negotiating with you. The others probably would have sawed off your toes by now. But I saw your marvelous skill, which is why I'm being sincere when I—"

"Oh, hey. There it is again. Moooo."

"...Rrgh!" Mitamura reflexively reached for the gun at his waist. His hand trembled in rage as he tried to control himself. As the tension in his muscles shook his arm, he said, "I am trying...to treat you like an adult. My job at the theater was to make sure the plan went smoothly and to deal with the aftermath. If you're out of the picture, then nobody will ever know what really happened. And yet, here I am opening up to you, telling you the truth, and trying to negotiate with you like a grown man. I am doing all of this in good faith."

"That would sound a lot more convincing without the vein bulging out of your forehead. What you're saying is I better work for you or you'll kill me. Where's the good faith in that? Besides, people at the top like me do what they want." Ranpo shrugged. "In any case, we're talking about me, a genius detective and skill user. Did you really think I'd let you take me all the way outside of town to be threatened without a plan?"

"...!"

Mitamura reflexively pulled his gun on Ranpo, but Ranpo simply looked down the barrel. "...You're lying," said Mitamura. "I searched you. You didn't have a transmitter."

"That's because I don't need one." Ranpo's lips slightly curled, and the muscles around Mitamura's jaw tensed.

"Fine. Then let me be honest with you. It pisses me off that a brat like you ruined our plan, and your arrogance gets on my nerves. So your skill lets you see the truth? So what? A pathetic skill like that wouldn't even be able to stop a single bullet."

He pulled back the hammer with his thumb. There was a click.

"But even then, I tried to be nice to you for the sake of our supreme purpose—to rid this country of the scum that plagues it—those who bring chaos—the parasites that eat away at the framework

of the nation—in other words, the skill users.”

“I see. So ‘V’ is an organization of skill users that banded together to get rid of other skill users, huh?” Ranpo faintly smiled.

“We use anything we can for our purpose, whether it be a skill user or a man hiding behind the witness protection program. That’s our—”

Mitamura’s hand holding the pistol trembled. His finger tightened around the trigger.

“Get on with it already. If you’re gonna shoot me, then do it,” taunted Ranpo as he gazed into the barrel. “Oh, but wait another five seconds first, okay? Because if my predictions are correct, then in three...two...”

A blinding flash of light flooded the room.

The glass windows shattered. A black shadow then leaped into the room and landed before spinning around.

“...?! ”

Mitamura stood paralyzed. He couldn’t even hold his gun up anymore; the silhouette that had jumped in through the window was expelling enough bloodlust to kill a lion. Immediately, Mitamura was knocked into the corner of the room.

“Gwah...!”

After slamming him against the wall, the shadow grabbed Mitamura’s collar and swiftly threw him before he could even fall to the ground. The speed of the throw created the afterimage of an arc in the air. This throwing technique would usually be referred to as *seoi nage*—a shoulder throw—in jujutsu. However, a move where the opponent was launched into the ceiling before slamming into the ground with no loss of speed was beyond the scope of a shoulder throw. It was as if Mitamura had been hit by a train before losing consciousness.

Bathing in the town’s nighttime illumination, the silhouette’s shadow stretched as he stood in the center of the room. The silent warrior stood as his clothes gently fluttered.

“Fukuzawa!” Ranpo shouted with glee.

“How many are left?”

“Five!”

At that moment, footsteps ran down the hallway outside the room. There was only one door. The first soldier rushed inside. In the blink of an eye, Fukuzawa grabbed the man’s wrist as he lifted his gun and began flipping him vertically in the air—*kote gaeshi*, a throwing technique in aikido that uses the opponent’s momentum against them. As the soldier was soaring in the air, Fukuzawa further twisted his

opponent's arm and slammed him into the wall. The soldier passed out, unable to pull the trigger, never mind even seeing the man who knocked him unconscious.

Fukuzawa then went into the hallway. Men armed with rifles stood on each side as they rushed toward him. They got into stance to fire, but Fukuzawa had already disappeared. By the time the soldiers realized their wrists had been grabbed, they were already on the floor. In the midst of the confusion, they tried to fire their rifles, but their weapons had already vanished as well.

Two elbow strikes hit the soldiers in the throat. Fukuzawa had the upper hand when it came to raw power, and in the instant before passing out, the soldiers only felt regret for underestimating their opponent.

It didn't feel like fighting against a human, or even a demon or wild animal. More specifically, it was like fighting against the laws of physics itself.

There was no way a mere gun could defeat the laws of physics. Fukuzawa silently rushed at the next armed soldier, who tried to lift up his gun in a fluster, but Fukuzawa quickly closed the few yards between them before he could. The palm strike to the soldier's chin let out a crack. As the man flew toward the ceiling, Fukuzawa gracefully ran past. But when he turned the corner, he found himself standing before a soldier with a submachine gun. It was an ambush.



“Die!”

The submachine gun could spit out seven rounds a second—and yet...the soldier couldn't even pull the trigger. He dropped the gun, clutched at his hand, and fell to his knees. A fountain pen was sticking through his palm. After throwing the pen like a projectile with godlike speed, Fukuzawa's sleeve fluttered open before slowly returning to normal. It was an old martial arts technique that used everyday items as weapons.

That was the fifth one.

“Want to keep going?” Fukuzawa asked as he approached the submachine gun-toting soldier.

The soldier held his hand and grimaced.

“...You...freak...!”

He backed off in fright and ran away, leaving his weapon and his comrades behind. Fukuzawa, however, quietly watched him escape without even attempting to go after him.

He walked over the unconscious soldiers and made his way back to the first room.

“Wow! That was awesome!” Ranpo said enthusiastically, his face split ear to ear in a joyous grin.

“Are you okay?”

“That was way above and beyond my expectations! That was the best thing ever! But, hey, looks like my calculations were right. I knew you'd make it in time. Anyway, thanks to you, the real culprit—”

Fukuzawa walked right up to Ranpo and stopped before taking in a deep breath.

“You dumbass!!”

Ranpo was hit with a powerful slap. An ear-piercing pop echoed throughout the room, and his glasses flew off.

“‘Calculations’?! You knew I'd ‘make it in time’?! What was that pointing in your face when I arrived just now?! A gun, that's what!”

Ranpo froze after the impact of the slap made him spin halfway around. A vivid red welt grew on his cheek.

“I...”

“There is no such thing as ‘for sure’ in this world! If it took me even a second too long to realize what had happened—if I were even a second too late getting here—you would have been killed!”

Ranpo was stunned as he held his cheek. “B-but I knew... I knew you would come.”

“No, you just wanted to demonstrate what you can do!”

Ranpo bore the full brunt of Fukuzawa's rage. The yelling was so loud that even the glass started to shake.



“You’re free to flaunt your gift, and you can challenge your opponents with it! But you have to stop gambling with your life! You’re still—”

Fukuzawa didn’t know why.

Why was he yelling this much?

Why was he this upset?

*Why—?*

“You’re still just a kid!”

Fukuzawa’s heart ached. He grimaced at the pain that was almost physical.

Why did he let this child go off on his own?

Why didn’t he go with him?

Ranpo was still so young...and so weak...



“Mm... Guhhh...”

Ranpo's lips tightened as he held his swollen red cheek. His wide-open eyes wavered as they welled with tears. Fukuzawa was immediately overcome with regret.

He had gone too far. Ranpo probably wasn't used to be scolded like this. Surely being yelled at and even slapped would—

“But... But...”

He trembled with his head hung low.

Large tears dripped to the floor. Fukuzawa exhaled as an indescribable feeling ebbed and flowed in his heart.

Ranpo, boy genius, orphan—nobody understood him, and he was all alone in this dark, cold universe. He was thrown out into the vast world with nobody to protect him.

Even Fukuzawa himself was hesitant. He didn't know how he should be there for Ranpo or how he should even treat him. And because he didn't know what to do, Fukuzawa simply gently patted Ranpo on the head twice.

Ranpo latched on to Fukuzawa. The tears streamed down his cheeks without end, sinking into Fukuzawa's clothing.

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm so...sorry!”

Not knowing what to do with his arms, Fukuzawa's hands hovered in the air. With a troubled expression, he gazed out the window into the boundless silence of the night. His eyes caught a glimpse of the round moon, white as a polished mirror. He gently stared into the moon, and it smiled back.



And then...

The case came to a close mainly thanks to Ranpo's efforts. The newspapers the following day were only talking about Murakami's sham, and the playwright along with the elderly man who died at the hospital after being stabbed were processed as personal crimes committed by Officer Jun Mitamura. Regardless, Officer Mitamura was found dead in police custody after being detained. It was as if he had been stabbed by some invisible force—eerily similar to how the playwright was killed. Most likely, a skill user from the enemy organization had been dispatched to make sure no information got leaked.

Their path to the real culprit was ostensibly severed, and the case

remained more or less unsolved. However, only a small number of people involved, such as Fukuzawa and Ranpo, knew the truth: Behind it all was a domestic underground syndicate known as “V,” whose goal was to rid the country of skill users.

And the battle against them was only beginning.

As for Ranpo, who’d been yelled at and mercilessly slapped...

“Hey, Fukuzawa, when’s the next case? C’mon, let’s go solve some mysteries! I’ll use my skill and solve it in a snap.”

...he had become extremely attached to Fukuzawa.

Not that Fukuzawa understood why, though.

“Fine. Just stop tugging on my sleeve. You’re going to stretch it.”

Fukuzawa softly scolded Ranpo, who cheerfully answered with an “Okay!” before letting go.

A year had gone by since the incident. Unable to get rid of Ranpo and at his wits’ end, Fukuzawa had no choice but to temporarily hire Ranpo to help with miscellaneous duties. Fukuzawa came up with a plan. In return for food and clothing, Ranpo would be taught various odd jobs, social norms, and academics as well, for knowledge was the world’s foundation. Studying was necessary to live, just as oxygen was needed to survive. That was the principle by which Fukuzawa lived.

And that...was how Fukuzawa lost his job. His job was to guard his clients, but whenever he brought Ranpo to help with the paperwork, Ranpo would swiftly figure out who the risk factor for the client was and where they were...before Fukuzawa ever even needed to guard anyone. Fukuzawa couldn’t simply ignore what Ranpo was doing, so he removed the risk factor as he was pressed to do. Before long, there was no longer any need to guard the client. Some people even began to request that only Ranpo came. Fukuzawa was on the verge of unemployment thanks to this sudden turn.

Granted, it was Ranpo who caused the slow business to resurge as well. Fukuzawa, with too much free time on his hands, received a new job offer, this time asking Ranpo to do some detective work. Rumors of a young detective who possessed supernatural powers capable of uncovering any truth had slowly spread throughout the city after the incident at the theater. He started receiving job offers from various strata of society and people from all different types of work, including the police. He would solve almost every case instantly at the scene of the crime.

Things were complicated for Fukuzawa, though. While it wouldn’t

be a problem letting Ranpo work alone, Fukuzawa accompanied him for the most part. One of the reasons was because he knew all too well how reckless and dangerous Ranpo could be, like during the incident at the theater, which was now known by many as the case of the “Murdering Angel.” But for the most part, the biggest reason why he accompanied Ranpo was because he was “the only one who could control him.” Ranpo was selfish and egotistical, but he listened to Fukuzawa for some reason. Maybe the slap and scolding after the first incident had had an effect on him. Or maybe there was something else that tugged at his heartstrings. In any event, Ranpo was attached to Fukuzawa and never left him alone. He was like a little puppy running around yipping, “Fukuzawa! Fukuzawa!” Even then, he would sit quietly for an hour or two if Fukuzawa ordered him to. From then on, every time a client wanted to request Ranpo’s services, they would beg, “Fukuzawa, please come with him! I’ll pay double!”

Before long, not a soul in the neighborhood hadn’t heard of the detective duo Fukuzawa and Ranpo: a selfish and uncontrollable yet genius detective teenager and an unsociable, quiet middle-aged man who was a master of close combat and boasted extraordinary strength. There wasn’t a conspiracy they couldn’t see through, no enemy that could escape them, no case they couldn’t crack. Murderers trembled at the sound of their footsteps, and wealthy men frequently came to pay the two their respects. Even the police sometimes visited in secret, begging for help on difficult cases. Known as skilled detectives, Ranpo and Fukuzawa solved countless cases together. Nobody stood a chance before them as the days of prosperity and unrivaled victory continued. And that was exactly why...

...the *moment of decision* was nearing.

“Looks like this is the place,” said Fukuzawa in the middle of a dark underground passage.

“Looks that way,” agreed Ranpo, pushing up his glasses by Fukuzawa’s side.

One day, Fukuzawa had requested Ranpo’s help. He asked Ranpo to find someone who appeared in unexpected places at unexpected times—someone whom no investigative organization could get a lead on. And in spite of all this, said individual was rumored to have connections with both the government and underground organizations, along with being near every conspiracy and scheme in Yokohama.

“I’m opening the door.”

In Fukuzawa's hand as he pushed the iron door in the underground passage was a dignified-looking cane. That cane was the only lead they had. Without Ranpo's powers of deduction, it would surely be impossible to find the target with such a small clue.

They strode through the dim room before descending even more stairs until they found themselves in a bright auditorium. There was a row of benches and tables with a blackboard and a teacher's desk against the front wall.

"Welcome to Bankoudou Hall," a cheerful voice echoed throughout the room. "Good work on finding the place."

Fukuzawa lightly bowed before showing the cane in his hand.

"Oh, why, if it isn't the cane I lost some time ago. You came all this way to return it to me? How commendable."

"Your reputation precedes you, sir. If you would pardon my intrusion, I came to ask a favor."

"Don't be so formal. Come, have a seat."

Fukuzawa bowed before taking a seat in the nearby chair. Ranpo, on the other hand, quietly stared at the man before him without even moving.

"No way... I didn't notice before, but he's—"

"I owe you my gratitude for saving me that day, my dear boy." The man cackled. He wasn't wearing a suit this time, but he still had on a bowler hat.

"Oh, okay," Ranpo mumbled as if he were standing on pins and needles. His voice was hoarse. "You saw through that trap at the theater from the beginning. You noticed the rug's adhesive, and yet, you allowed yourself to fall into the trap. Why? Was it to lure out the enemy—? No, there were plenty of ways you could have done that—"

"Whether I did or not, I owe your father." He smiled faintly.

Ranpo stood absolutely still as if he were struck by lightning. "Don't tell me... From the very start, you—"

"I came with a request," Fukuzawa abruptly said, cutting him off. "As you know, Ranpo here has been building a reputation as a skilled detective. But it is taboo in the world we live in for a skill user to go public and try to make a name for themselves. That is why I would like to request your help."

"A Skilled Business Permit, yes?" The man grinned. "So you're telling me...you plan on starting a business?"

"Yes," replied Fukuzawa.

Fukuzawa asked himself:

*Am I even capable of becoming a boss?*

*Am I prepared to be the leader of an organization?*

He still didn't have an answer. He even felt inexperienced. Fukuzawa had hidden behind his skills as a martial artist, grown

frightened of the thrill of killing, and distanced himself from others, choosing to live out his years alone. He was weak and unable to reject these desires, and it even felt as if that weakness coagulated and swelled over time.

But Fukuzawa had undergone a significant change over the past year solving cases with Ranpo. He'd been thrown for a loop, what with Ranpo pulling him every which way while people praised him and begged him for help. It was a chaotic year spent solving cases, sometimes willingly, sometimes not. But he did it all together with Ranpo, and he learned something: what it meant to be a leader, what it meant to help others as a team.

Over the past year, Fukuzawa discovered something he never expected: He still wanted to help others. He wanted to be the shield that protected the weak and the sword that vanquished the unjust. He wanted there to be fewer people who grieved over the death of a loved one at another's hands. He didn't want to pretend as if he didn't notice that the weak were being unfairly exploited. He wanted to be someone who would quietly stand before those who do wrong and scare them, dissuading them from committing misdeeds.

For lack of a better word, what he wanted in the end was justice.

He still wanted to be just. And to not repeat the same mistakes, he needed Ranpo by his side. But not only Ranpo. He needed far more allies who could fight. He wouldn't be able to protect Ranpo forever, after all. He wanted to create an aria of righteousness that would live on in this violent yet beautiful city for when he or even Ranpo was gone. And for that, he needed a team—people who were strong but kind—an armed, never-ending group of detectives based around Ranpo.

*Is this an inordinate ambition, too big for me to handle?*

"I beg of you." Fukuzawa lowered his head. "It wouldn't be possible to receive permission from the secret government organization, the Special Division for Unusual Powers, through half-hearted efforts. No money, connections, or abilities would ever be enough. That is why I need the help of the man rumored to know everything about this city. I need *your* help, Souseki Natsume."

"I see."

The man took a few steps before stopping in front of Fukuzawa. He quietly gazed into Fukuzawa's eyes as if he were peering right into his heart, and then...he smiled.

"It won't be easy."

That moment...

That moment was the start of it all.

It was the start of an armed organization from Yokohama whose name would soon be well-known even abroad. Standing in the twilight, a group of skill users with extraordinary talents who fought for justice and struck fear into the hearts of the wicked.

A legendary detective organization that would save countless lives under their president, the skill user Yukichi Fukuzawa.

This was the Armed Detective Agency's first step forward.



## AFTERWORD

How time flies. It feels as if it were only yesterday when the second *Bungo Stray Dogs* novel was released. I spent too much time writing this novel sitting under the *kotatsu*, so I ended up hurting my back. Also, I learned I didn't have any clothes to wear to go buy clothes for meetings, and I lost yet another sock to the abyss. But I'm doing well, despite that. I also have my heart set on never wearing mismatched socks again.

I don't leave the house much due to the nature of my work, but the other day I went to the zoo for a change, where I saw a bird called a shoebill. It lorded over its surroundings with a piercing gaze befitting of a monarch. "Surrender and serve me or die resisting," it seemed to say, to which I instinctively responded "Your Excellency!" and bowed. His Excellency's expression didn't change; he simply stood still all day, barely even moving every now and then. That's when I thought to myself, *I wish I could exude such a powerful aura and spend the rest of my life doing absolutely nothing, just like His Excellency!*

At any rate, that was what I did during the time I wrote this novel. I hope you all enjoyed the two stories.

I would like to take this time to thank everyone for reading this book, and I would also like to extend my gratitude to illustrator Sango Harukawa and Editor I. for their help once more. Well, until we meet again!

KAFKA ASAGIRI

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